

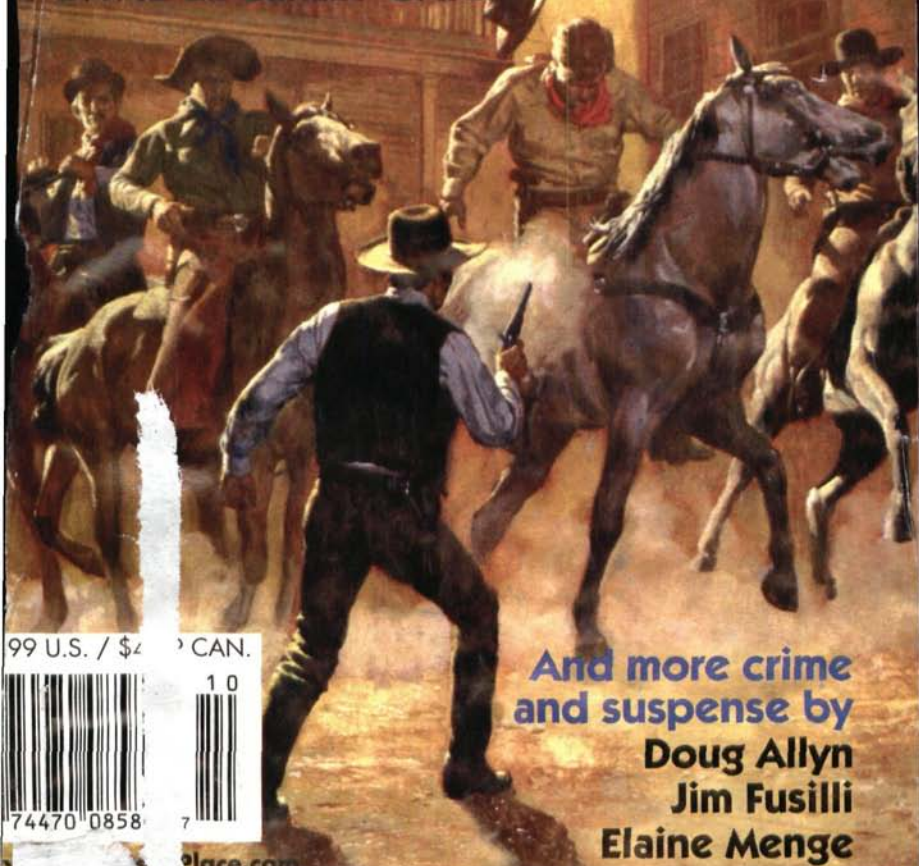
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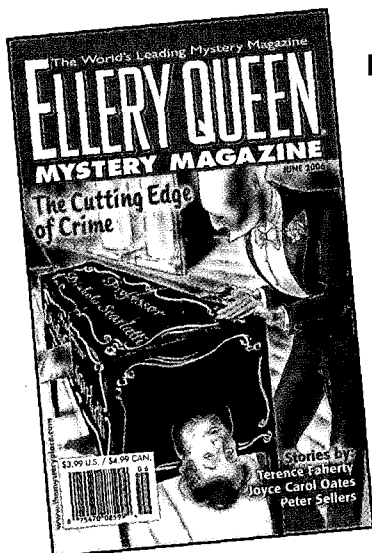
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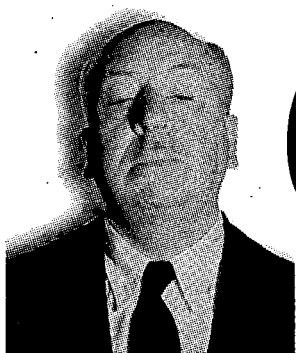
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# C CONTENTS

October 2006

*Cover by Shannon Stirnweis*

## FICTION

- 4 THE VALLEY OF ANGUSTIAS by Steven Torres
- 34 THE PECULIAR DEATH OF DANIEL HUNT  
by Keith McCarthy
- 64 BOXES OF HELL by Elaine Menge
- 84 RUSSELL DAVENPORT AND THE BREAK-IN ARTISTS  
by Alex Auswaks
- 95 THE COTTONWOODS by David Edgerley Gates
- 108 SURVIVING SPOUSE by Doug Allyn

## AHMM CLASSIC

- 127 SHATTERPROOF by Jim Fusilli

## DEPARTMENTS

- 3 EDITOR'S NOTES
- 60 BOOKED & PRINTED by Robert C. Hahn
- 63 MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH
- 101 THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER by Willie Rose
- 102 DYING WORDS Acrostic Puzzle by Arlene Fisher
- 104 REEL CRIME by Steve Hockensmith
- 126 SOLUTION to the September Dying Words
- 141 THE STORY THAT WON

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Indicia on page 143



## EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

## BAD BEGINNINGS?

It all has to start somewhere. In this issue we have a number of "bad" beginnings to take note of. Steven Torres introduced AHMM readers to his Puerto Rican sheriff, Luis Gonzalo, in these pages last year ("UFO," November 2005). Gonzalo returns in this issue, though as a much younger man, in "The Valley of Angustias," a story about how he got his start in crime. Doug Allyn also brings us a story about a new beginning, of sorts, with "Surviving Spouse." Insurance Investigator Russell Davenport helps a young, pregnant woman when her boyfriend ("a tea leaf") is run down by a van in the dead of night in "Russell Davenport and the Break-In Artists" by Alex Auswaks. Elaine Menge doesn't disappoint with "Boxes of Hell," which could be described as a story about the end of a bad situation, or the beginning of bad karma—you'll have to decide that for yourself.

We welcome Keith McCarthy to this issue with "The Peculiar Death of Daniel Hunt," featuring pathologist John Eisenmenger and solicitor Helena Flemming, who are the main characters in Mr. McCarthy's forensic series published by Carroll & Graf (*A World Full of Weeping*, the latest, came out in June.). Mr. McCarthy is himself a pathologist when he isn't writing. Our AHMM Classic was another beginning for Jim Fusilli. Not only was it the first story he published with us in 1988, it was also his first published short story. Mr. Fusilli has gone on to publish the critically acclaimed series featuring Manhattan-based P.I. Terry Orr. The fourth in the series, *Hard, Hard City*, was published in 2004 by Putnam.

With this issue we also welcome the return of a reader favorite: David Edgerley Gates brings us another Placido Geist story, "The Cottonwoods," which is short but satisfying—and is a prelude to a longer story that we will be publishing soon in an upcoming issue.

Bad beginnings perhaps, but when they're bad, they're very, very good!

# THE VALLEY OF ANGUSTIAS

---

STEVEN TORRES

**I**t was the first of June, 1964, and Luis Gonzalo, one week after graduating from college, was looking for work. He was the first citizen of Angustias to attain a college degree and return to the small town, but that did nothing to make his search for employment easy.

"Don Jose is going to be planting a few acres of banana and platanos," Gonzalo's mother said.

"I didn't study agriculture," Gonzalo answered. He didn't look at her as he said it, but he knew she was staring at him. His father had scratched the dirt to pick out a living; his grandfathers both still did. What made him think he was better than farmwork? How could he explain to her that he didn't think he was better? He didn't think it, but he hoped it.

"History and literature," his mother said, and though she had cheered when he accepted his diploma a few days before, it was an indictment when she said it.

That morning, Gonzalo went to see the mayor. The mayor also had been at the graduation and had whispered something at the end of the ceremony about a job.

Francisco Cruz was happy to see Gonzalo, but that was no special honor. Francisco Cruz was happy to see everyone; it was the quality that got him elected every four years. He greeted Gonzalo with a hug and a slap on the back. Cruz was a small man; had he been larger the slap would have hurt. He guided Gonzalo into a chair, then sat in the leather swivel chair behind the desk. The pleasantries took five minutes—asking about Gonzalo's mother and sister, other family members, friends, although he and Gonzalo had spoken just the day before.

"I'm here about the job," Gonzalo said. He had been squirming in his seat throughout the talk.

"What job?" Francisco Cruz said. Gonzalo's stomach dropped, and he took in a small gasp of air.

"Oh, the job, the job," Cruz said. Another smile spilled across his





face. "Sure, sure. Well, we always have work here in the city. Right now we have one job open. I don't know if you want it, but maybe . . ." Cruz put his hands up as though to say all was out of his power.

"What is it?" Gonzalo asked. He had several plans for his near future, and all of them involved a salary.

"Road cleaning. We need an extra man now in the summer. The grass grows so fast, and Chuito Acevedo retired recently. It pays the minimum, of course, but next year the state is going to build a new stretch of highway through here. There will be more hiring to do then. In a few years, you might be able to move up to supervisor then, who knows, maybe road repair, work with tar, that sort of thing."

**When outsiders start attacking the townsfolk, a bar owner offers protection—for a price.**

Cruz's smile was large as he said this. It was a plum position, funded by the state, with a health plan; regular work—the roadside weeds never stopped growing so there was never a layoff or furlough. Gonzalo's smile did not fare so well. He tried to maintain it as Cruz explained about the job, but his teeth dried, and he was sure there was disappointment written all over his face. In the end there was a silence between the two men. In a minute even Cruz's smile began to fade.

"Do you want time to think about it?" Cruz asked.

Gonzalo would have liked to have been able to say "No" right then, but at the moment he was trying to calculate whether there was any other prospect for him, whether he would have to stay in the road cleaning job all his life or whether it could be used as a stepping stone to a position that had nothing to do with roads. How much was minimum wage when multiplied by forty hours? Could there be overtime pay?

"Can I give you my answer next week?" he asked.

Cruz's smile disappeared completely for a moment, but he regained it.

"Next Monday? Sure. No more than that though. Those weeds don't wait."

Gonzalo left the *alcaldia*, the government building, and took a seat on a bench in the town plaza. The morning sun was still gentle. In an hour or two, it would roast. He tried to think through his options and the complications that surrounded his job hunting. He had met the perfect woman in college and wanted to marry her, this summer if he could. He had promised her it would be possi-



ble. His degrees perfectly suited him to be a high school teacher, but there were no openings anywhere near to Angustias; he had checked that even before graduating. He could find a job in a distant city; he had no doubt about that, but his mother had long been a widow, and he didn't like to leave her. His practical experience was limited. He had worked on the land with his father as a small boy. When his father died, Gonzalo had gone to work for other farms in the area, picking coffee or peas, yams or bananas during the school vacations and weekends. Throughout college he had worked in several stores—the bookstore, a pizzeria, a shoe store. Retail, he thought to himself, and he got off his bench.

Rafael Martín owned a large grocery store not more than a hundred yards from the plaza. He was getting older and had occasions when the store was closed for a day or more due to illness. Before Gonzalo had crossed the distance to Martín's store, he had convinced himself that Martín needed an assistant manager.

When he walked into the store, Rafael Martín was doubled over behind the counter in a coughing fit; a lit cigar was in his right hand as he patted his chest with it.

"You know, they say smoking is bad for you," Gonzalo started. He wanted to sound helpful, smart, and yet an easy conversationalist. Martín looked at him a moment and coughed some more.

"Who says that?" Martín said.

Gonzalo shrugged.

"I've been smoking cigars for fifty years," Martín said. Proof that smoking could do no harm.

Another coughing fit served as a perfect introduction of Gonzalo's purpose.

"An assistant?" Martín sounded like he thought he was being scammed, but Gonzalo explained the advantages.

"You can take a vacation; we can stay open late; if you're sick, the store doesn't have to close."

Martín was thoughtful a few moments, half convinced. Another coughing fit, and he waved Gonzalo away.

"Tonight," he said. "Before I close. We'll talk."

It was an hour-long walk home, but Gonzalo smiled the whole way. He ate his lunch with a great appetite, showered, changed into clothes he thought looked a little more like those an assistant manager would wear, and planned to walk back late in the afternoon. Even his mother approved of him working for Rafael Martín. The man was wealthy, childless, and she told her son that there was no limit to what might happen if Don Martín hired him. Assistant managers became managers became partners became owners.

"I don't even have the job yet," Gonzalo said, but it was hard to stop thinking of the possibilities.

Not wanting to sweat during the walk back to town, Gonzalo left early, walked slowly, and arrived an hour before the appointed time. He sat on a bench in the plaza to wait.

There were a dozen businesses on the blocks leading away from the plaza that let out workers at that hour. Some went home, some went to nearby restaurants or bars, some congregated in the plaza to talk. The sun, which had shown no mercy earlier, relented. Gonzalo watched the people while keeping track of the passing time on his watch. Though he had spent much of the past four years away from Angustias, every face was immediately recognizable to him. At ten minutes to the hour, he rose and made his way to the store of Rafael Martín.

Martín usually sat on a crate behind the counter of his store until near closing time, when he started to shuffle through the store putting things away and preparing to lock up. Gonzalo walked in a few minutes before six. Not finding the owner sitting on his customary crate or walking through the establishment, Gonzalo headed for the small room that Martín used as an office and as extra storage space. Martín was inside, on the floor, bleeding and breathing fast and shallow.

"Don Martín," Gonzalo said. Don Martín didn't answer. Gonzalo knelt beside the older man and touched his face. Don Martín focused his eyes on Gonzalo's and moved a shaky hand up toward his face.

"I'll get help."

Gonzalo ran out of the store, straight for the *alcaldia*. It was closed, but he knew where Francisco Cruz lived; it wasn't far.

The mayor of Angustias came to the door himself. He was busy chewing.

"What?" he asked. "If it's about the . . ."

"Don Martín is dying."

Gonzalo explained what he had seen, Francisco Cruz made a call to the nearest hospital, then they both went to Martín's store.

Don Martín was less able to focus by the time Gonzalo knelt at his side again. His breathing had become a bit more regular, but his jaw wouldn't work, and one of his fingers was broken, jutting out from his hand at an unnatural angle.

"Who did this to you?" Francisco Cruz asked several times, using different tones of voice as though that might help to make himself understood. Don Martín's gaze rolled from one man to the other as though he were trying to figure out who they were.

The paramedics, when they arrived a half hour later, walked through a small crowd that had filled the front of the store and gurneyed Don Martín out. Their initial estimate was that Don Martín's jaw was broken along with several of his ribs. The doctors in Ponce would be able to say more. Francisco Cruz told Martín he would meet with him in the hospital; Martín would not have to face his treatment alone. He wasn't sure Martín understood him.

The ambulance left, and Cruz did the work of securing the store for the night, sending the spectators home, and locking the door. Gonzalo helped, and the two men walked to Cruz's home together.

"And you?" he asked Gonzalo.

"Me what?"

"What role do you have in all of this? Why were you back in town this late? What were you doing in the store?"

"Don Martín said he might hire me to help run the store. Assistant manager."

"Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Hire you?"

"I was supposed to find out his decision at six. When I went in, he was lying on the ground like you saw him."

"And there was no one else in the store? No one outside?"

"No one in the store. Plenty of people outside on the plaza."

Cruz got into his car and motioned Gonzalo into the passenger seat.

"Anybody you don't know? Anybody who could have done this?"

Without warming the car's motor, Cruz pulled away and was soon on the road to Ponce. Gonzalo took a minute to make a mental inventory of the people he had seen on the plaza. No one he could not identify. Certainly no one who would have attacked Don Martín. In fact, he couldn't think of anyone in all of Angustias who would have attacked the man even though Don Martín was known to be cantankerous sometimes. He told the mayor this.

"Well, someone did it," Cruz said. Gonzalo didn't bother to agree with the assessment out loud. He wondered if there was any way Don Martín could have gotten his injuries from a fall. Nothing came to mind.

It was nearly a two-hour wait in the hospital before Cruz and Gonzalo were allowed to see Don Martín. His mouth was wired shut, his hand was in a cast with his pinky in a splint. There were bandages on his legs—the doctor said the man's shins had been kicked, as had his ribs.

"How are you doing?" Mayor Cruz asked. Don Martín rolled his eyes.

"Do you know who did this?" Gonzalo asked.

Don Martín shook his head. He had lived all his life in Angustias, and the entire town, more or less, passed through his store at one time or another; if he didn't recognize who had beat him, they were outsiders.

"Was it just one man?"

Don Martín held up two fingers. Hand signals and nodding brought out more information. The two men were young—in their twenties—and they were each about Gonzalo's height and weight—five ten and one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Don Martín started to tire as he signaled to explain the type of clothes the young men had on—jeans, sneakers, T-shirts.

"One last question," Gonzalo said. "Do you know which direction the two men entered the store from? Did they come in from the plaza or from the other side?"

Don Martín didn't know.

Francisco Cruz didn't smile on the drive back to Angustias. There is always crime in any town. Angustias was too small to have its own police force, but that did not mean there weren't thefts, domestic disputes, and barroom fights. This, however, was different from what Cruz normally had to deal with. Two men had come to Angustias and very nearly killed one of its citizens. Another kick in the ribs might have finished the storeowner. The worst aspect of the crime was its anonymous nature—strangers selecting a stranger and attacking him for no reason. Nothing had been taken from the store. If money wasn't the issue, and there was no personal relationship between victim and perpetrator, then the crime was random. Nothing was more terrifying.

"Those were good questions," the mayor told Gonzalo as they neared Angustias.

"Well, I had plenty more," Gonzalo said.

"Maybe you can ask them tomorrow."

Gonzalo didn't say anything. He would have loved to figure out who did this to Don Martín and why, but he wasn't a detective. He wasn't even the assistant manager of the store. He had a job search to conduct.

By the time the mayor drove back into Angustias, police had arrived and taken a look at the store and were waiting to get a statement from Gonzalo. He didn't have much to say. He hadn't seen anyone suspicious, hadn't heard anything, and Don Martín hadn't said anything. The officers had found someone who was in the store right after quitting time at five. That left about forty-five



minutes between the customer and Gonzalo's arrival in the store. One of the officers had Gonzalo repeat his story, pressing him a bit on each fact. It seemed he was their best suspect.

"Should I be worried?" Gonzalo asked one of the officers as they shook hands at the end of the interview.

"Nah," the man told him. "We're going to talk to this Rafael Martín. Worry if he says you did it."

Gonzalo didn't worry. Instead, he went home, had a late dinner, told his mother and sister all about what had happened. They listened attentively, then they added information: so and so said this, this other person said that. Speculation about Don Martín's situation had apparently reached all the way around town. Nothing at all that sounded like a fact.

Gonzalo was awakened early the next morning by Francisco Cruz.

"Come with me," the mayor said. Gonzalo readied himself, ate a breakfast his mother had already prepared for him, and went out with the mayor. He didn't know why the mayor had come to get him, but given Don Martín's situation, it seemed like a good chance there was a road cleaning job in his future; doing as the mayor asked now was good practice. They drove to a little clothing store on a street a block over from the plaza.

"Why are we here?" Gonzalo asked when the mayor got out of the car. He wouldn't have said anything at all except he thought they were headed to Don Martín's store or the *alcaldia* and was surprised with where Cruz parked.

"Can't you see?" the mayor asked.

Gonzalo couldn't. Cruz pointed to the large plate glass window, then went in. Gonzalo walked up to the window, trying to see what was wrong. It took him ten seconds to figure out that the glass was missing.

Doña Ausencia was seventy years old, but she sat at the back of the store surrounded by five or six neighbors, crying uncontrollably like a child. Someone gave her a paper cup with water, and she spilled half of it getting it to her lips.

"Someone," Mayor Cruz whispered to Gonzalo, "threw a rock through the window, climbed in. Doña Ausencia was in the back, came out to see what was happening, and they chased her."

"Did they hurt her?"

"No, no. She ran into the closet and closed the door. They kicked it. See?" Francisco Cruz pointed.

The door to the closet was cracked down the middle. There were three boot prints.

When she was able to talk, Doña Ausencia didn't have much to

say about her attackers. She didn't get a good look but didn't know them. Two men, young. As far as she knew, they hadn't taken anything. They almost killed her with fear.

The police came and asked Doña Ausencia questions she had already answered for her neighbors.

"Where's the glass?" one of the officers asked.

It had been swept up by a neighbor along with the rock that was used to break it. Both officers rolled their eyes and left the trash can with its debris. Cruz walked them back to their car. He was angry when he came back.

"They're not going to do anything," he said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because they told me, 'We're not going to do anything.' They say they think it was probably the same two guys who attacked Don Martín, but neither witness gave them enough of a description to be sure about it, and there are no leads."

The police who serviced Angustias were stretched thin. They were stationed in another, larger town, and besides patrolling the main road that went through town, they came in only rarely. They didn't know the people of Angustias or the side streets. The people of Angustias, *los Angustiados*, were used to dealing with problems on their own. They were used to having their problems make some sense, however.

"What should we do?" the mayor asked.

Gonzalo was about to answer that he wasn't a detective and didn't know what should be done next, but with one person in the hospital and with Doña Ausencia unable to stop shaking, it didn't seem like a time to claim ignorance. Besides, he had some ideas.

"I think—" he said. The mayor leaned in closer to hear the pronouncement. "I think if I had the time to investigate this, I would make sure to keep the trash can with the glass and the rock safe, and I would not let anyone touch that closet door. Also, there are some questions that I would start asking the people who live on this block and the block where Don Martín's store is. I would ask store owners to be aware that this may happen again later today or tomorrow. They should try not to be alone if it can be avoided. Anyway, there is a lot to do."

"Then we should get to work," Francisco Cruz said.

"Well, as you know, I'm looking for work. It might take days to clear up this problem. Also, it's dangerous sniffing along on the trail of these men."

Cruz thought for a moment before answering.

"Angustias will pay you," he said. "Twenty dollars a day until this is all figured out."

That was much more than minimum wage, but Gonzalo didn't answer right away. He needed another concession.

"I would take the job, but I will need help. There are a lot of people to talk to, and if I do it by myself, it can take a long time . . ."

Crúz agreed to assist and to have the deputy mayor and several other town officials pitch in on the door-to-door questioning. By the end of the day, people who lived near Doña Ausencia and Don Martín's stores had made clear one important detail—the two men arrived and drove away in a beige Chevrolet. Both stores were on one-way streets and the strategy had been to drive past the store, park around the corner, walk calmly back to the store and just as calmly to the car again.

On his part, Gonzalo got someone to take a Polaroid picture of the boot print on the closet door. He carried it with him to the brooks and streams that flowed through Angustias. The rock was a smooth one, but if it had been worn smooth by water, it didn't seem likely to be water from Angustias.

The next morning, early, Cruz was at the Gonzalo home again. Another attack, before dawn, a farmer. His door had been kicked in, he'd been dragged out of bed and beaten in front of his wife and three young boys. No motive, never seen the two guys before, they didn't say anything, broken ribs and a broken nose.

Gonzalo's questions were nothing different from what had already been asked by neighbors and the mayor. When he left the small house, Mayor Cruz followed him.

"That's it?"

Gonzalo stopped and thought a moment. He went back into the house.

"José, I'm going to ask you a question. If you don't want to answer, then don't, but I think it might be important. How much did you make last year?"

José Alvarez looked from one person to another in the room. He was holding a wet towel to a spot under an eye where he had a small cut.

"Why?" he asked.

Gonzalo didn't say anything. He didn't want to pry. The house he was standing in was small. There were three children with a fourth on the way. Whatever amount of money José made from his farm, it wasn't enough. Still, Gonzalo was trying to form a picture of the next likely victim. The first two were elderly and

defenseless; José Alvarez was strong and young. The first two had stores; Alvarez, just a farm.

"I made about three thousand last year," Alvarez said. Not terrible, but nothing to be proud of, and his eyes lowered to the ground.

"That might help," Gonzalo said. It was the only thing he could think of, then he left.

"How is that going to help?" Cruz asked outside.

"Not sure," Gonzalo said. It wasn't a very powerful statement, but soon it didn't matter. The sun had only been up for little more than an hour, but there was a second attack. A woman flagged down the mayor's car as they approached town.

"Domingo," she said. "Someone beat him up." The woman making the report was Domingo's wife. They no longer lived together but were still married. Reyes had called her when he came to, she said. He was alone in his house.

Domingo Reyes owned a bar near town and lived in an apartment above. Loud music and drunken arguments filtered up deep into every night. This explained the housing preferences of Mrs. Reyes.

At this hour, Domingo was upstairs on the balcony of his apartment. He was sitting in a lawn chair, an open beer in his hand. His eyes had raccooned, his lip was split.

"When did this happen?" Gonzalo asked.

Domingo looked first at the mayor, whose expression somehow conveyed that Domingo should answer the young man.

"Last night. After closing. Maybe two in the morning. Two guys. They were waiting for me when I closed up the place."

"Where were they waiting?"

"On my stairs. I tried to fight them, but they were too strong, too fast."

"Were they armed?"

Domingo shook his head.

"Say anything?"

"They said, 'don't tell anyone.' Then they gave me a couple more kicks and left. Strange."

"What was so strange?"

"Well, I've been robbed before, but usually they take the money." Domingo pulled a small roll of bills from his shirt pocket.

"Maybe they didn't find it," Gonzalo said.

"It fell out of my pocket while they were punching me. One of them put it back in before they left. Some kind of good Samaritan bastard." He took a long drag from his beer.

"Have you ever seen these guys before?"



"I barely saw them at all. They took out the light bulb for the stairs. I thought it went out until they grabbed me. One grabbed my arms behind me; the other punched me in the gut. With the first punch, I basically stopped seeing straight. The guy doing the punching had a five o'clock shadow and his hair slicked back; light skin, my height or a little taller. The other guy had on leather work boots. Hurt like hell."

"Anybody angry with you the last few days?"

"Besides people who want me to start them a tab? No."

"We need you to repeat all this for the police," Mayor Cruz said.

"Don't bother with them," Domingo said. "Nothing was stolen. If they wanted to kill me, they could have done it last night. If they wanted to hurt me, well, that job was pretty much done."

"You're saying you don't think they'll be back?"

"I don't see why they would."

"Well, don't tell anyone about this until later, okay?"

"I open up at four thirty. Right now, I'm taking the phone off the hook and going to bed." He finished his beer as the mayor and Gonzalo got into the car.

"Why did you tell him to say nothing?" Mayor Cruz asked as they headed for town.

"Well, it's not too useful because he already told his wife, but people are getting scared, and we need less of that, not more."

"Maybe I should have a town meeting. We can talk about what's going on, what we know, what we don't know."

"I would leave out the part about what we don't know," Gonzalo said.

Gonzalo ate a late breakfast in a diner near the center of town. The talk all around him was of the attacks of the last few days. Terrible. Horrifying. Why? What was the mayor doing? When he was done, he went to a nearby store and bought a notepad and a pen. Sitting on a plaza bench, he sketched out what he knew about the victims and about the attackers. He put down the times of the attacks and what had been said to Domingo Reyes, the only thing said to any of the victims. After two pages of details, he tried to see if there was any way to put the information in order. The attackers had given Reyes his money back when they could so easily have taken it. They attacked male and female, elderly and young, the poor and well off, store owners, bar owners, and farmers. Tangled in these thoughts, Gonzalo didn't notice the mayor until he stood right at his side.

"Another attack," he said. Gonzalo followed him back to the diner where he'd had his breakfast.

In the lull between breakfast and lunch customers, the diner had been virtually empty. Lolita Gomez, the diner's owner and only worker, had been in the back when the two men came in. She got a good look at them, had never seen them before, was afraid of going near them. She did it anyway. One guy grabbed her by the throat and slapped her so hard it made her ears ring. The backhand stopped the ringing. He didn't realize who Lolita Gomez was, however. He didn't know how much of a match for him she was. When he raised his hand for another slap, she raised hers. Her reach was too short to get at his face, so she jabbed the pencil she was going to use to take his order into the muscle of his upper arm. It was a thick muscle, but a long pencil. The man screamed, let her go, said he would be back, and he and his partner left, turning over two tables as they went. Part of the pencil was found out on the sidewalk. About two inches of it was thought to be still in the man's arm.

Lolita's description, though more detailed than anything that had been given so far, was not too helpful at the moment. The police in Ponce sometimes used a sketch artist; maybe he would travel to Angustias.

"I don't need the police here," Lolita said. "Lunchtime is coming."

"But he said he would come back," the mayor pointed out. She shrugged.

"Let him come. I got more pencils."

In the end, she agreed to see a police officer if he came after the lunch hour rush.

"Well," Cruz asked as he and Gonzalo walked to the town hall, "do you have any ideas?"

"I've got a couple," Gonzalo said. "First, you should let the police know that they should warn hospitals and clinics. If anyone comes needing a pencil fragment removed, the doctors should know to call the police. After that, can I make a phone call?"

When he had made the announcement to the police at the nearest stationhouse, Mayor Cruz left Gonzalo in the office to make a call. He called his fiancée. She was happy to hear from him, but he was in a rush. It was long distance, and he assumed the city of Angustias would bill him for it. He explained the strange job he had taken temporarily.

"Well, it's very good money," she assured him. "But it sounds a lot like that movie we saw, the one with the Mexican actor. Remember?"

He wanted to tell her that he remembered very little about their time together except that she was there and that was all that mattered to him, but it wouldn't be manly to fawn like that. When

was it he learned to hide the love he felt? Why were men consigned to that fate? She gave him the outline of the plot.

"First they scare the people of the town, then they come back and say they'll protect them for a fee. They don't rob the people, the people are happy to pay them."

"And how does that one end?" Gonzalo asked.

"Federal troops fight them in a shoot-out," she said.

That didn't seem like a viable option, but it gave him an idea. He brought it to the mayor.

"A posse?" Cruz asked. "Like in a John Wayne movie?"

"Well, I think there will be more attacks. These men are not beating people up for nothing. They may be planning on a long-term business here in Angustias. They may be armed. They're obviously violent. There are some people in town who own guns, but even an air rifle is good. We have one at home to keep the hawks away from our chickens."

"Great. But where do we look for the criminals? Are we going to follow their trail like Apaches?"

"We're going to do better than that. We're going to wait at their watering hole."

Lying in wait for a criminal is a difficult task not to be delegated to just anyone. There is the question of trying to stay awake, but there is also the moment of confrontation to be handled. One may have the upper hand, but this cannot be abused. Of course, one might also be outgunned.

There was only one gas station in Angustias. It was on the northern fringe of town, fairly isolated. A Chevrolet the size that all witnesses agreed was being used by the attackers was a thirsty animal. The men might use gas stations anywhere, but Gonzalo had in his mind how slowly, how calmly they walked from the crimes they committed. Men so nonchalant would not hesitate to stop for gas. Or so he hoped.

The two men did not return that day, though there was a group of men patrolling the town and standing guard at the gasoline station throughout the night. In the morning, however, as Gonzalo was taking his turn, sitting just inside the gasoline station with his air rifle resting across his lap, the men in their beige Chevrolet drove past, heading into town. Gonzalo rushed out to the street and took aim, but the car went round a curve in the road and was lost to him. He called Mayor Cruz, warning him, but it didn't help. The car stopped at a house at the far end of town that doubled as the only shoe repair shop in Angustias. The owner, Ignacio Ramos, used his cobbling hammer to fend off his attackers, but they overpowered him, dragged him out to the street by his hair and in

front of neighbors beat him until he sagged to his knees, then crumpled over onto his side.

Mayor Cruz immediately received a call from one of the neighbors who had seen the whole thing. He called the gas station. Gonzalo had just picked up the phone when he saw the Chevrolet heading back the way it had come. He hung up and stepped out. He felt certain that the car would pull in for gas. The driver was laughing about something, one arm hanging out of the window, a small white bandage covering where a pencil point had drawn blood. The passenger was examining the knuckles of his right hand. When it was clear they weren't stopping, Gonzalo raised the rifle, took aim, and hit his mark.

The driver swerved from the feeling that another pencil had been jabbed into his arm. Gonzalo was priming the gun for a second shot when the car pulled to a stop twenty yards past the gas station. He raised the rifle again as the driver put the car in reverse.

"What are you doing?" the driver yelled out. He was furious. Gonzalo shot him in the face from fifteen feet away.

The pellet was painful. Perhaps the best course of action would have been for the driver to keep driving, to get away as fast as possible. He opted instead for getting out of the car. He was reckless; he left the car door open behind him, the key in the ignition, the car still in reverse. His passenger, sensing the need to beat another *Angustiado* to the ground, jumped out only a fraction of a second behind the driver who approached Gonzalo, his arms stretched out in classic "*¿Que pasa?*" pose. The third pellet, from only five feet away, struck him in the neck, making him double over for a moment from the pain. When he stood up, Gonzalo had already started running.

There were woods behind the gas station, a thick forest, sloping down and away from the road. Gonzalo ran into the woods priming the gun, knowing he had only four more shots before he'd have to use the rifle as a club. He skipped over a large root and heard his pursuer trip behind him; he turned and found the driver raising himself from a facedown fall just a foot behind him. Gonzalo used the rifle butt on the crown of the driver's head, then he aimed a pellet at that same spot from inches away and fired. The man lunged from his prone position like a bull enraged, grasping at Gonzalo's pant leg. His hold was too weak. Gonzalo mashed the rifle butt down on the hand three times. It was bloody after the first hit.

The man rose to his knees more angry than ever.

"I'm going to—" he said, but Gonzalo's kick to the face didn't let him finish the thought. The man moaned and tried to roll away,



but this just exposed his belly to Gonzalo, who took advantage of the opportunity to apply the rifle butt and the toe of his boot until he was sure the driver was going nowhere. It was only then that he thought of the passenger who had also exited the car. He primed the gun and ran back around to the front of the gas station. No car or passenger. He found a length of hemp cord and went back to secure his prisoner. The man was on all fours.

"Get back on your stomach," Gonzalo ordered.

"Or what?" the driver said. Gonzalo shot him where his torn shirt exposed a pale love handle. He dropped to his belly, one hand smoothing over the latest injury. Gonzalo primed the gun again and approached, bringing the rope from a back pocket. He stopped short, not sure how to tie the driver's hands together while still holding the rifle.

"Turn your face to me," Gonzalo said.

The driver did as he was told.

"I need to tie your hands behind your back, but this is going to hurt," Gonzalo said.

"Why?"

Gonzalo smashed the rifle butt into the man's ear. After that pain, the man had no more questions, and he followed Gonzalo's orders about clasping hands behind his back and standing so that while it could have been a struggle, the driver practically tied himself up.

As the prisoner led the way back to the gasoline station, Gonzalo following three feet behind, he tossed a question over his shoulder.

"How many bullets does that thing have?"

"Why? You want more?" Gonzalo answered. He wasn't trying to sound tough. He was just angry. Somehow, though he didn't remember getting hit, his lip was bleeding.

No one answered the phone at the *alcaldia*. Gonzalo was thinking of who to call next when a car pulled up outside. It was Francisco Cruz with three other men from town. The posse had arrived.

"How did you know?" Gonzalo asked.

"Your last words on the phone were 'They're here'."

Gonzalo wanted to ask what took so long but refrained.

"Where's the other one?" one of the deputies asked.

Gonzalo shrugged.

"Did you see which way he went?"

Gonzalo shook his head, but the look on his face made it clear he wasn't happy to be answering questions about the one that got away if no one cared about the one that had been caught.

In the time it took the police to get to the gas station, Gonzalo and Francisco Cruz asked their prisoner a terrific number of questions but got no answers at all. The prisoner wouldn't say his name or explain why he had done all he had done. He spat twice; the only two times he opened his mouth.

That evening, Gonzalo was to come to the town plaza for a little celebration where he could explain how he had captured the hoodlum with no name. The crowd was small but appreciative. At the front, seated in a folding chair, was Don Martín, back from the hospital with a cane. Near him was Doña Ausencia. She was laughing with him, smiling. The troubles of a few days before had lifted from her. Lolita Gomez was not there; her diner was open for business serving the hungry fringes of the crowd.

The mayor explained what had been happening and the tremendous progress that had been made. He didn't expect any more trouble, but Angustias was going to maintain a high level of alert for the next few days in case trouble came. Cruz explained Gonzalo's role in the whole affair, then had Gonzalo explain himself, then patted him heartily on the back while telling the listeners that without the young man at his side, there would have been no progress at all.

The entire celebration took a little under an hour, with the gathered people going off in pairs and trios at the end of the mayor's report.

"It was good what you did," Doña Ausencia told Gonzalo as she was about to leave. Don Martín was at her side holding on to her elbow so that Gonzalo couldn't tell who was supporting whom. Don Martín nodded his agreement vigorously and mumbled something through a jaw that still wasn't working right before turning with Doña Ausencia to leave. The mayor took them home.

Gonzalo was in conversation with a man who thought there might be a job opening up one town over for a person with clerical skills when the mayor returned. Doña Ausencia was still in the car, and she was crying.

"What happened?" Gonzalo asked, leaning in through the driver's side window.

"Somebody ransacked her house," Cruz said.

"They broke everything!" Doña Ausencia wailed.

Gonzalo and the mayor went to Doña Ausencia's house after she had been taken to a cousin's house to spend the night. Not everything had been broken, but there was certainly a mess. There was also a short note scribbled and left on her dining room table: "We'll be back."

"It happened while she was at the plaza," Cruz explained.

Gonzalo tried to think what had made Doña Ausencia so important to the attacker. A lot of people had left their homes to be at the plaza. True, her home was isolated a bit—set back from the road by fifty feet, nestled into a small grove of fruit trees. But her's was hardly the only one in Angustias that fit that description. He couldn't come up with anything, and when the police arrived, he was ready to leave.

"It says 'we' in the note," one of the officers pointed out, "but there's only one left."

"Maybe he has a new partner," Gonzalo said. It was like the idea hadn't occurred to the officer. Maybe it hadn't.

The next morning, Gonzalo was buttoning up his best shirt to start his journey to hunt down the job he'd been tipped off about, when Mayor Cruz tapped on the metal slats of his window. Gonzalo rolled them open.

"There's more work," Cruz said and walked off to his car.

This time the attack was against a farmer leading his cow to the fields. The Chevrolet pulled up alongside them as they walked the road, and two men—one of them fit the description of the partner of the man who had been captured the day before—got out and approached. The farmer, knowing what was about to happen to him, let go of the lead cord and ran into the woods nearby. The two men gave chase for a few yards, then went back and killed the cow with several quick stabs to its neck. The farmer told the story and gave descriptions while crying for his cow. Mayor Cruz drove him home and tried to comfort him, but his nerves, as well as his plans for future subsistence, were wrecked.

"These men don't seem to want to stop," Cruz said as he drove Gonzalo to town.

"They have a plan," Gonzalo said. He had already told the mayor about the movie he had seen. Cruz had found the scheme implausible at first, but he was willing to listen to it now.

"So what do we do?" he asked.

"We wait for someone to start offering to protect people," Gonzalo answered.

"And then?"

"Then we arrest them."

Cruz thought about it for a moment. It must have sounded like a good enough plan—he nodded.

Later, after Gonzalo and Cruz had spent the morning discussing for the tenth time all the details they had gathered about all the attacks, and just as they were sitting together to lunch, word came to them via a running messenger that another attack had occurred

only a few hundred yards away. Another small shop had been invaded, a customer had been pushed aside, the store owner beaten, his wrist broken, his eye bleeding. Cruz drove to the shop as fast as his car would go, but there was no sign of the hoodlums who had done this when he got there.

"I'm getting a little tired of this routine," Cruz said.

"Patience and vigilance will make the difference here," Gonzalo answered.

"Another Hollywood movie?"

"I don't think so."

**L**ate in the afternoon, Cruz drove Gonzalo past the bar run by Domingo Reyes. They were on their way to Gonzalo's house, but the sight of twenty cars and trucks parked in front of or near the bar a half hour before the opening time meant something was going on, and Cruz parked without asking Gonzalo if it was all right to delay the trip home. It was a consideration Gonzalo did not think of.

The bar was filled with men and some women taking up all the chairs and most of the floor space. Several were seated on the two pool tables. Behind the bar, Domingo Reyes stood; he was speaking loudly and waving a handgun. Beside him were six men standing shoulder to shoulder, all armed, three with handguns and three with rifles.

"We will protect you," Reyes was saying. "The police are never going to get here in time to save you from danger; they will never be here before the trouble begins. They come in after you have been beaten, with a handkerchief so you can clean up your own blood. The seven of us will be here all the time. Hell, we live here."

Gonzalo looked at the mayor, but Cruz was busy listening just like everyone else in the crowd.

"Three other men with guns are ready to work for us. All we need," Reyes said, "is a financial commitment from you. If you are willing to pay just three dollars a day each, we will make regular patrols past your house several times a day, and we will respond to an emergency call faster than any police department on the island can."

"Three dollars each, or three dollars per family?" someone shouted out.

"Per family, per family," Reyes answered. "Sorry, I should have made that clear."

"And what happens if you get beat up anyway?" someone else wanted to know.

"Look," Reyes said, pointing to the bruises on his own face. "I've

been through that. I don't want anyone to go through that. But it might happen even if you do pay us the money. I won't lie and say it's impossible. But not only will I refund your money, whatever amount you have paid up to that time, but I will also give you twenty dollars from my own pocket." To prove that he was a man of his word, he pulled twenty dollars from his pocket and put it on the bar.

There was a low murmur as neighbors consulted. Gonzalo tried to get the mayor's attention, but Cruz was listening to the chatter around him.

"So who is with me?" Reyes went on with energy. "Whoever has three dollars can be protected starting right now."

A line quickly formed at the far end of the bar, where for the first time Gonzalo recognized Mrs. Reyes. She was taking crumpled bills from the men and jotting their names down. Some were paying for several days in advance, and it was only a few minutes before she had gathered over a hundred dollars. Several more cars had pulled up during the speech, and people who had been listening from positions outside the bar were filing in to opt into the plan.

"Did you hear all that?" Gonzalo asked when he finally caught the mayor's eye.

"Yep," Cruz said. He sighed and moved through the crowd toward the front of the bar where Domingo was. The two men stood across the bar from each other and spoke earnestly with each other for a few minutes. Then Cruz came away shaking his head. He led Gonzalo outside and back to the car.

"Don't ever become mayor," Cruz said. He was clearly frustrated.

"What happened?"

"Well, I spoke with Domingo, but I guess being mayor doesn't earn me any respect. It's like I'm a nobody."

"What did he say?"

"He said he can't extend me credit. 'If I give you credit, then I have to give everyone.'"

"What do you mean?"

"The three dollars for the protection. I told him I don't have it. Not on me. I have to go home to get it."

Gonzalo said nothing. He couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound like he was calling the fragile-egoed mayor feeble-minded as well.

The next morning there was another beating; someone who had not yet paid for protection. Domingo Reyes had a steady stream of customers and many of those who had paid for one day's protection and gone through the night without an attack bought several more days of protection.

Gonzalo was dressed and had eaten and was listening to the



radio when Francisco Cruz arrived at the front door.

"Doña Fidelia called my mother," Gonzalo said. "So I've heard about the beating. I think we should . . ."

The mayor stopped him with a hand up and a smile.

"I'm here to pay you what I owe," Cruz said. He pulled out a check already filled out. It was the biggest check Gonzalo had ever held in his hands, but it also meant the job was over.

"Domingo Reyes looks like he can handle this by himself. Well, him and his men."

"But people can't pay three dollars a day."

"It won't be forever," Cruz said. "Reyes said he would be lowering the price in a week or two."

"But remember," Gonzalo tried, "Reyes might have been the one behind all of this."

"There's no proof of that. He's trying to help," Cruz said.

There was no arguing. Gonzalo was back on the hunt for a job that afternoon. The tip about the next town over came to nothing. By the time he came back in the evening, someone else had been beaten in Angustias, and though everyone told him about it, he wasn't asked to do anything, speak to anyone, or otherwise meddle.

The next morning, defeated, Gonzalo walked into town to seek the mayor and a job clearing weeds from the roadside.

The mayor wasn't in. He was consoling the victim of another beating. Gonzalo took a seat on a bench near the plaza fountain and listened to the trickle of water. The idea came to him to visit Don Martín's store—there was a chance the old man had reopened the store, though his doctors would have advised against the strain. Maybe it was a good time to talk with him about the assistant manager position.

Don Martín was inside with a cane, clearing off a shelf into a cardboard box one can at a time. He wrote out his greetings for Gonzalo and explained he was closing the store for good. He was too old for the business. It had been sold.

There was nothing Gonzalo could say to argue. It was Don Martín who had the broken jaw, broken ribs, and bruises. And it was his store. He offered Gonzalo ten dollars for helping him throughout the rest of the day packing away cans and dismantling shelves. At the end of the day, Don Martín made Gonzalo another offer—twenty dollars to help him pack away the furnishings of his house later in the week.

"You're moving?" Gonzalo was shocked. After all, Don Martín was a fixture in Angustias. Don Martín's answer was a slight nod.

Out on the plaza on his way home, Gonzalo ran into the mayor. "About that job," Gonzalo started.

"Which?"

"Roadside cleanup."

"Oh. Oh, that one. I gave that to someone else—Raulito Vega. You know him. He doesn't have a college degree, but . . . well, that's not a requirement for swinging a machete."

For a fraction of a second Gonzalo wanted to protest, but then the job in question simply wasn't worth it, and he had made enough money in the last few days to stave off anxiety for at least two weeks more.

"Did you know that Don Martín's moving?" he asked.

"Who isn't moving?" Cruz responded. "There are at least five families selling their homes. Three have already sold. Don Martín is number four now."

Gonzalo thought for a moment.

"Who else has sold?"

"Doña Ausencia, for one. José Alvarez. Pancho Rivera."

"Pancho wasn't attacked," Gonzalo said. Cruz shrugged. Pancho was smart for selling before he was attacked.

Gonzalo got a ride home, then before entering he looked to the sun descending but hours from extinguishing in the sky. He walked on without going in.

A footpath to a dirt road to a paved but narrow one. José Alvarez's house was on this road; by the short cut, thirty minutes walk from Gonzalo's house. He wanted to ask Alvarez about selling the house, about leaving Angustias, but there was laughter coming from the children and even from the parents as Gonzalo approached, and he didn't have it in him to disturb that moment for the family, a family he supposed had had few things to laugh about in the previous few days.

Another twenty minutes uphill and Gonzalo was in front of Don Martín's house—no lights on and no car in the driveway. He kept walking, passed at one point by a Ford pickup carrying one of Domingo Reyes's mercenaries, as some people called them. With another half hour he was in front of Pancho's house—no car, no lights, possibly at Mass.

If he walked a half hour past the dirt road that had brought him onto this paved one, he could reach Doña Ausencia's house, maybe talk some sense into her about leaving town. But then that would leave him walking home in the absolute darkness of a small road with no streetlamps. As it was, he made it home just as the last rays of sunlight were put out.

Early the next morning Gonzalo was in Don Martín's store. There was a truck and truck driver that had been hired, and

Gonzalo was helping to load the truck, though there was no extra money to be made from it and Don Martín hadn't asked for the help. Gonzalo, however, insisted it was part of the service he had been paid for the day before. Besides, he was looking for a good time to ask his questions. That didn't come until the truck was full and driven off near lunchtime.

"My mother was thinking of selling her house," Gonzalo started. It was a lie, but Gonzalo thought it was best to start that way. "And I was wondering if you could tell me about how much you got for yours. Of course, if this is too private, then . . ."

Don Martín was proud of the bargain he had made. He wrote out the figure on a scratch pad he carried with him. Four thousand dollars for two acres and a small house. Generous, Gonzalo thought, though he didn't know much about real estate.

"And who is going to be our new neighbor?"

"Alonso Mendoza."

Though there were several Mendoza families in Angustias, the Alonso name rang no bells for Gonzalo; apparently he was an out-of-town buyer.

"And this Alonso Mendoza came to speak to you face to face?" Gonzalo asked. Don Martín's face and gestures said the question was a dumb one. Of course, Alonso Mendoza had conducted his business face to face.

Gonzalo ate his lunch at the counter in Lolita Gomez's diner. He tried to think through who had been attacked and when and where; why was a more interesting proposition. He stopped Lolita for a moment as she was making her way out to one of the tables.

"Have you ever heard of Alonso Mendoza?" Gonzalo asked.

"Alonso who?" Lolita answered, and she kept on with her work.

Gonzalo stayed around after his meal, waiting for the lunch hour rush to subside.

"Has anyone offered to buy your store?"

"Why? Are you thinking about making an offer?"

"No, no. I was just wondering."

"There have been a lot of offers in the past couple of years."

"And since the attack?"

"None."

A short walk to Doña Auscencia's shop showed that it was dark and empty and the front glass had not been replaced or boarded over. Gonzalo crossed the plaza and went down a side street to find the cobbler, Ignacio Ramos. Ignacio's face was still swollen and bruised, but he was at work, sitting on a bench on his porch.

"Has anyone offered to buy your house or your business since the attack?" Gonzalo asked after the greetings.

"Why? Do you know anyone interested?" Ramos asked. "It's not a bad house once you take all the shoes and supplies out. There could be room for a nice family in here." Ramos got up from his bench and unlatched the front gate to let Gonzalo in as though he were a potential buyer.

"I won't take up your time, Don Ramos. I was just curious. Some of the other victims of the recent troubles have sold their houses. Don Martín, Doña Ausencia, José Alvarez. I was wondering if anyone had asked you to sell your house."

"No. But then all those people have houses in the hills. Maybe someone wants to build something up there or make a big farm. I used to have land up there too, but I sold it months ago."

"To Alonso Mendoza?" Gonzalo tried.

"Who?"

"You've never heard of Alonso Mendoza?"

Ignacio Ramos searched his memory but came up with no such name. Gonzalo let him go back to work. Gonzalo tried to relax once he was back at home, but he felt anxiousness within, as though he had finally received all the needed pieces to a puzzle and all that remained was to put them in the right order. His mother came in from the market, breathless with news.

"There was a shoot-out," she announced. "Just like in the Wild West. The two *sin vergüenzas* tried to beat up Bernardo Maldonado, but just as they were going to start, one of Reyes's men drove up in a pickup truck with a rifle; he shot at them. One of the guys had a gun and shot back. It looks like the guy with the gun got hit in the leg, but so did the guy working for Reyes. The *sin vergüenzas* drove away. Bernardo Maldonado came out of this without a scratch, which is good because just this morning he went to Domingo Reyes to pay the three dollars." She bustled into the kitchen with the groceries.

Gonzalo saw it all now—how the pieces of the puzzle went together, or at least most of them. A few pieces didn't fit. Alonso Mendoza was one of those. Gonzalo felt like rushing back to town to be in the middle of the flow of gossip and information. He restrained himself a moment.

"Do you know anything about a man named Alonso Mendoza?" he asked his mother. She came out of the kitchen to answer.

"Of course, I know about him," she said, then she went back to packing away the groceries.

Alonso Mendoza was the uncle of Martín Mendoza, the wealthiest man in Angustias and one of the wealthiest on the whole island of Puerto Rico, though he was a year or two younger than Gonzalo. "The Black Sheep," as Doña Gonzalo called him, Alonso

had left Angustias when she was a child and hadn't been back, but for a few years back then, he had been heard of, mostly as a man who had lost the enormous fortune he had been gifted in a series of visits to casinos in San Juan, Las Vegas, and Europe. Then, it was rumored, the Mendoza family, Martín Mendoza's father really, had given him another fortune. That, too, was spent decades ago. If he had money to buy a house or two, she didn't think it came from the family. There hadn't been even a rumor about him to reach her ears since long before Gonzalo was born.

"I guess for him it is lucky these attacks have occurred recently so that people want to sell their homes," she pointed out. It was as much as Gonzalo could take. He kissed her cheek and left for town.

"Alonso Mendoza is forcing people out of their homes, making them think it is unsafe to stay here. He's buying their land and houses, their businesses for cheap," he told Francisco Cruz.

Cruz sat back in his chair and thought.

"But he paid Don Martín four thousand for two acres and a small house. That's not cheap," Cruz countered. "That's fair."

"For now," Gonzalo said. "But you know better than anyone, once the new highway is built, property values will go up for a lot of people, right?"

"Yes," Cruz drew out.

"Does the plan for the new highway bring it past Don Martín's house?"

Cruz nodded and searched in his desk drawer. Finally, he pulled out a stack of contracts and a large map of the area that had been folded and refolded so that it only showed the portion of Angustias that would be affected by the planned construction. He moved his finger across a hilltop and into a valley.

"And Doña Auscencia?" Gonzalo asked. "And José Álvarez?"

"Yes, of course. Everyone on this road."

"Domingo Reyes?"

"Especially Domingo Reyes. His bar is at a junction between the road you live on and the one that's planned. It'll be prime real estate."

Gonzalo looked at his watch.

"His bar should have opened ten minutes ago. Give him a call. Ask him if he's been given an offer."

Cruz was a little reluctant, but he did as suggested. There was no answer. The two men decided to take a drive over to the bar to make sure everything was all right. They weren't.

Domingo Reyes had been tied to a wooden chair, gagged with a red bandana, and beaten until he died. His hands, tied behind his back, dripped blood still. His hair was wet through. He had died only minutes before Gonzalo and Mayor Cruz arrived, though as



Gonzalo quickly pointed out, he might have been left bleeding an hour earlier.

When the police arrived at Domingo's home, they collected fingerprints and took photos. When Gonzalo and the mayor explained their concerns about Alonso Mendoza, one of the officers said it was a nice theory. Then he asked the mayor and Gonzalo to leave the crime scene.

News of Domingo's murder spread quickly throughout Angustias. People were surprised at first, then terrified. They wondered who they would pay the three dollars to. They wondered if the murder was an accident or an escalation and who was next.

By the time Domingo Reyes had been lowered into the earth, the beatings around town had stopped, the vigilante group he had formed had disbanded, and Alonso Mendoza had entered into contracts to purchase eight properties in the valley where Reyes had had his store. He was negotiating for at least as many more.

Gonzalo accompanied Cruz traveling throughout the valley trying to convince those with property to hold on to it. It was during one of these trips that Gonzalo met with Alonso Mendoza face to face. Mendoza was leaving the home of a farmer as Cruz pulled up in front with his car.

"I've heard what you've said about me," the man said. He was smiling and wagging a wooden cane at Gonzalo as though he were castigating a small boy or a dog. "You can't keep spreading lies about me."

"Or what?" Gonzalo asked. "You'll kill me too?" He wasn't combative by nature, but Alonso's tone sounded like a taunt in Gonzalo's ears. To the question, Alonso Mendoza simply shrugged and started to walk away.

"Accidents happen," he tossed over his shoulder. There weren't many ways to understand his meaning.

The day after this confrontation, Alonso Mendoza entered into a contract to purchase two more properties in the valley, and a small cloud of doubt lifted from Gonzalo's mind.

He had wondered why Lolita Gomez was attacked if she didn't own any land in the valley.

"I did," she told him when he pressed her about it. "I inherited some land—an acre and a half—about eight months ago. I sold it a few days later."

"To who?"

"To Hernandez, the lawyer. He gave me a thousand dollars," Lolita volunteered. Hernandez, one of two lawyers working in Angustias, had sold his holdings to Mendoza a few days earlier. Lolita had owned the land long enough so that official records had

her down as the property owner, but no one had bothered yet to take her name off the tax rolls.

"I got a notice to pay the property tax just a few days ago," she told Gonzalo. "I threw it away."

That evening, the bar Domingo Reyes had run for more than a decade was reopened with his widow behind the bar, dressed in black with a white apron. The mood was somber, the customers' voices subdued; some were dressed in suits and ties and had their hair slickly parted; none drank anything stronger than beer.

Gonzalo got the widow's attention and drew her to the least populated side of the bar.

"You understand that this could be dangerous, no?"

"There are many dangerous things. This was our livelihood. I never liked it, dealing with the noise and the drunks, but this is how we made our money. What am I supposed to do? Close the place down and die of starvation?" She seemed a little bit angry, as though she was tired of explaining herself. Maybe she had gone through this story a dozen times with different customers; maybe she had worked it over in her own mind ceaselessly before returning to the bar she hated. Maybe she just resented feeling like she had to make her decisions understood to someone fifteen years younger than herself.

"You realize that Alonso Mendoza is buying up all the property he can get in the valley," Gonzalo pointed out. "In fact, he may have been the one responsible for . . . for the incidents that have caused so many pain . . . for the incidents that have caused many to sell and move."

Anna Reyes shrugged; what the Fates had decreed was out of her hands.

"I've already spoken with him," she said. "This is a business, Gonzalo. Every business has its sale price. The bottles behind the counter each have a price, the glasses cost a certain amount. Even the tiles you are standing on, I remember, they cost twenty-two cents each." Gonzalo glanced down at the floor as though checking whether Reyes had gotten his money's worth. "Anyway, Alonso is coming here tomorrow morning to check the place out. Maybe he'll make an offer."

"He won't offer what it's worth," Gonzalo warned. She shrugged again.

"Maybe not. But remember, this place also has an acre of land to the back and a very nice apartment upstairs," she said. Then she went to attend to a customer whose beer had run dry.

It bothered Gonzalo that Anna Reyes might well make the most

money out of all those who sold their property to Alonso Mendoza. She was right, of course. The law might never catch up to Alonso Mendoza, and no one was going to pay her bills or buy her food except herself. She hated the bar, but her options, if she wanted to eat every day, were exactly to keep it running or to sell it. It seemed that the death of Domingo Reyes would benefit both his wife and his killer.

In the middle of that night, Gonzalo awoke, sweating. He had been dreaming of a movie he had seen where giant spiders took on the American army, but when his mind cleared, he had a solution that might please Anna Reyes and keep her from the indignity of having to sell her husband's bar to her husband's killer.

He got out of bed early, dressed well, and headed out for the bar. The widow had moved back into the apartment upstairs to be near her work. Gonzalo rehearsed his opening statement.

"Doña Anna, your bar needs a manager, someone honest, good with bookkeeping, and willing to work long hours to ensure your success . . ."

He was going to propose himself as a manager for the bar. He thought that if she agreed, she might be willing to let some of his wages be paid in use of the apartment above. This would provide him with a salary and a place to live. It would allow him to get married sooner.

He heard shouting as he neared, and as he made out the words he also made out Alonso Mendoza's car in the small paved area in front of the bar.

"That's not enough!" he heard Anna Reyes scream. "Don't you see how that's not enough?"

Something made of glass shattered. Gonzalo ran to the stairway at the side of the bar that led up to the apartment. As he hit the top landing, the noise of two gunshots rebounded off the concrete walls. Gonzalo charged into the apartment. Doña Anna stood over Alonso Mendoza, her stare willing him to die. Mendoza was on his back, trying to lift his head off the ceramic tile floor. He waved his right hand in the air slowly, as though he were outlining a passing cloud. After a few seconds, the hand stopped, and Alonso Mendoza's head rested on the floor, his eyes still open.

"What have you done?" Gonzalo asked. He wasn't trying to sound accusing.

Anna Reyes looked at him as though the world had grown so strange that there was no reason why he should not be there, though she hadn't heard him come in. If Mendoza can lie dead on the floor, why couldn't Gonzalo appear out of nowhere, uninvited?

"What happened?" Gonzalo tried again.

"I shot him," Anna said, pointing at the corpse with her gun hand. Gonzalo looked at the gun and the body.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh. He wasn't able to come up with the right price," Anna said. Gonzalo had no idea how to deal with that answer or the situation he faced, so he called Francisco Cruz. Anna and Gonzalo sat out on the balcony, waiting for the mayor to arrive. The widow broke the silence as Cruz parked.

"I asked him how much the bar was worth," she said. "And he said five thousand. I told him what I wanted—I wanted Domingo back—but he only offered me six thousand. When I pulled out the gun, he offered seven thousand." She waved the gun.

"Why don't you put that down?" Gonzalo said. His voice was low. He wasn't afraid; after all, he hadn't killed Domingo Reyes. Doña Anna waved the gun again and still had it in her hands when Francisco Cruz came up the stairs.

When the police came later, they took a statement from Gonzalo, the closest they had to a witness. He told them—shouting, glass breaking, then shots.

"Self-defense then?" the officer asked.

"Well . . ." It didn't matter. The officer had already written his note and wasn't listening.

The gun was taken as evidence. Doña Anna was questioned but not arrested. These same officers had spoken to her when her husband's body was found. She broke into tears as she retold what had happened, and they were not going to bring in a hysterical woman in their squad car. They did make a call from her living room and spoke with a detective who, from thirty miles away, declared there was no reason to bother the woman who had already suffered so much.

A week later, several of the properties Alonso Mendoza had entered into contracts for reverted back to their prior owners. After funeral costs and paying off several debts, his estate didn't have the funds to make the payments that were needed. Several other properties were passed along to Alonso's nephew, Martin Mendoza, who didn't really need them.

"You did well in the investigating," Francisco Cruz told Gonzalo. Gonzalo had heard of a possible job stringing up lights and decorations for the Fourth of July in a couple of weeks. It was, of course, only temporary work, but better than nothing. It had, however, already been promised to someone else.

"Thank you," Gonzalo said. Going from house to house asking

questions and shooting a criminal with an air gun were not really things one could put on a résumé.

"Would you like that job?" Cruz asked.

"Which?"

"Sheriff of Angustias. It pays better than the minimum, but not much. It is a state job, and you would need to go to San Juan for some weeks of training."

"There's no such thing as a sheriff of Angustias," Gonzalo said. The possibilities of that type of job were already running through his head, so that he found it hard to concentrate on the mayor's explanation of how the police who had responded to all those beatings and the two homicides had complained about the chore of protecting such an out of the way place. The governor himself had added to the budget a request for a small stationhouse and the salary of one law enforcement officer in Angustias.

"You would have a badge, a uniform, a gun," Cruz pointed out. "No squad car; that's not in the budget, but we could think of something. Maybe we could reimburse you for mileage on your car."

"I don't have a car."

"Well, maybe you can get one; then we can reimburse you for the mileage."

There were benefits to the job and obvious dangers.

"Boredom, I think," Cruz said with a smile. "Most of the time, we don't have people beating up the citizens. Still, it's a steady job."

Gonzalo asked for time to think it over, discuss it with his fiancée. Cruz agreed.

"Monday, okay? I need to fill the position or we lose the funding."

It took the four days between that meeting and Monday morning for Gonzalo to convince Mari, the woman he loved, that he could do this job and come home safely each night.

"If I take the job, we can get married this summer instead of next year," he argued.

"But you could get hurt."

"I'll be the one with the gun."

She was not entirely convinced by his reasoning, but she was unable to withstand his pleading. In the end she gave her blessing to his taking the position, and Gonzalo was sitting on the steps of the *alcaldia* waiting for the mayor when he came to the office on Monday morning. For the mayor, the encounter meant the filling of a position that was sorely needed. For Gonzalo, it was the start of a whole new life. 🐾



# THE PECULIAR DEATH OF DANIEL HUNT

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KEITH MCCARTHY

**“W**hat do you know about spontaneous human combustion?”

Helena was reading the newspaper as they sat together on the sofa watching a DVD. Eisenmenger looked at Helena, his surprise taking his eyes from the screen despite the fact that it was a particularly exciting scene involving spectacular special effects and patently impossible action sequences. “Pardon?”

She looked up. “Spontaneous human combustion.”

He had half thought that it was a facetious question, but he saw from her face that she was serious; Helena was good at serious, it was part of her beauty. He asked warily, “Why do you want to know?”

She was back in the paper. The DVD continued to show magical mayhem, oblivious that it had momentarily lost its audience. “There’s a report here of a man found dead in his house, burned to ashes although the room was barely touched. The police aren’t commenting, but the papers are talking about spontaneous human combustion.”

He snorted. “Really? Not aliens, then?”

She smiled. “You’re not cynical about it, then?”

“Only a lot.”

“Why? There are plenty of recorded instances.”

“There are plenty of recorded instances of people being burned to death, I’ll concede. It’s the ‘spontaneous’ bit I can’t quite swallow.”

“Then how does it happen?”

“I’ll give you ten to one that the victim in this case smoked and drank, and twenty to one that he was overweight and old.”

She read some more. “It says that there were empty bottles of spirits in the house.”

“See? And I bet he smoked too. The vast majority of cases are people who get drunk in a chair or in bed while they’re smoking.

Nobody bursts spontaneously into flames." It was perhaps ironic that at this moment he picked up his tumbler of whiskey and took a swallow. "It's a myth that ranks alongside UFOs, poltergeists, and the Abominable Snowman in terms of veracity. It's hogwash."

"Then how come the bodies are burned so completely?"

"If the temperature gets hot enough, animal fat will burn just as fiercely as cooking oil. The more fat, the more fuel you have. Add some alcohol and you've got a highly combustible mixture."

"Why doesn't the rest of the room burn?"

At times such as these, when she seemed to be cross-examining him even though they were at home, he felt she took her legal training a little too seriously. "If it does, it's called a house fire," he explained. "If the chair or the carpet or the curtains don't catch—hey presto!—you have a 'supernatural' phenomenon. Except it isn't . . ."

She turned back to the paper, reading further. "Aha!" she announced triumphantly after a short while. "It says here that he *didn't* smoke." She seemed inordinately pleased that she had found a weapon with which to strike him.

Eisenmenger shrugged, his interest back on the screen. "So it was something else. Perhaps there was a power cut and he had a candle, or maybe he was drying his hair and the dryer malfunctioned."

None of which impressed her.

Into her silence he added, "Mark my words, Helena. There's a perfectly natural explanation for it."

"This is Amanda Hunt."

The woman presented to Eisenmenger was perhaps thirty-five; not pretty but nor was she ugly. She had long brown hair tied into a ponytail and a face that was overlain with tiredness but still clearly alert and intelligent. She had gray-blue eyes and thin pale lips; a dusting of freckles was uncamouflaged by any makeup.

She was clearly distressed.

Helena explained, "John, I've invited you here because Miss Hunt has asked me to help her with a problem, and I think you might be interested. She is the sister of Daniel Hunt. You remember? He was the gentleman who burned to death in his house? The gentleman whose habits and characteristics you were able to infer so precisely."

He was caught by surprise. Turning to the woman, he said, "He was your brother?"

She nodded.

He failed to hide his shock. "Forgive me. I had assumed . . ." He

didn't know how to put it and resorted to asking, "How old was your brother?"

"Thirty-two."

He saw Helena in his peripheral vision. Her eyebrows were arched, her mouth shaped into something that could only be described as a smirk. He said to their visitor, "My condolences."

She flashed a brief smile. "Miss Flemming tells me that you're a pathologist, that you might be able to help."

"What with?"

Helena said, "Miss Hunt is dissatisfied with the cause given for his death."

"Which is?"

"Accidental death."

"Why is that a problem, Mrs. Hunt?"

The kind of smile that upsets small children. "Miss."

Eisenmenger did his best to clamber over her chilliness. "Sorry . . . Miss Hunt."

She said then, "I know it sounds stupid, but in the last few weeks before my brother died, I thought that he was worried about something."

"Fearful for his life?"

"Oh no. I wouldn't go that far. Just . . . perturbed."

Eisenmenger noted the word and liked her for using it. He risked a look at Helena, who ignored him and asked Amanda Hunt, "Did you ask him about it?"

"Oh yes, but he denied it. He said that I was imagining things, but I wasn't."

"About when before he died did this start?"

"I don't know . . . perhaps two months, perhaps a little more."

"What did he do for a living?"

A simple question, but she had trouble with it for a moment.

"He didn't work," she said eventually.

"No?"

"He was ill. He had mental problems, and he was epileptic."

Eisenmenger asked, "Did he live on his own?"

She nodded. "He had carers, though."

"Carers?"

"Someone came in morning and evening to make sure that he took his tablets, to feed him, and to get him up and put him to bed."

Eisenmenger asked, "Forgive me for asking, but I assume that he was quite seriously disabled, then?"

She seemed to have problems with his terminology. "Daniel had some problems, yes."

They both heard secrets being danced around. Helena asked, "How long had your brother had these problems?"

She didn't need to think for long. "Eight years."

"What happened eight years ago?"

"He was involved in a car accident. He was in a coma for two weeks; it took another three months before he was out of hospital. After that, he was left not only with the epilepsy but also with severe depression. There was a time when he was having fits almost every week."

"What about recently? When did he last have a fit?"

"Not for a year, maybe fifteen months."

Helena asked, "The police say that they're satisfied that there was no second party involved." She looked directly at Amanda Hunt. "But you're not."

A shake of an attractive head.

"Do you have any specific reason for disbelieving the police?"

"They haven't explained how it might have happened. All they've said is that they're satisfied that no one else could have been responsible."

"But you're not satisfied with that?"

She frowned. "Would you be? Spontaneous combustion? What kind of way to die is that?"

He tried to suppress his smile but didn't quite succeed as he glanced at Helena, who in turn asked, "I understand that your brother drank?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No."

"But . . . ?"

"He didn't drink. Not anymore. He used to, but he'd given up a year before."

Eisenmenger was just a bit too cynical to swallow that answer without a bit of predigestion. "And when he *used* to drink, just how much would that be?"

She dropped her gaze as if admitting something shameful. "A lot. Maybe a bottle of vodka a day; sometimes more."

Neither he nor Helena said anything, but that was damning enough. She added, "But I know that he'd stopped. Really stopped."

Which, of course, neither of them could quite believe. Helena asked, "Did Daniel smoke?"

"He gave up after the accident. To my knowledge he hasn't smoked for eight years."

She was, Eisenmenger thought, the kind of person who was always certain about everything.

"Were you closest to him, Miss Hunt? What about your parents? What about friends?"

"Our mother is dead. Father . . ." She trailed quite noticeably to a hesitation before, "Doesn't take much interest."

There was something behind that remark, but neither of them felt able to dig deeper.

"And friends?"

A shrug. "Daniel didn't really have any. He didn't go out much, you see."

Having exhausted this particular line of inquiry, he then turned to Helena and opened his mouth to ask for the post mortem report, but was silenced by the fact that she was already holding it out for him to take.

It was a single sheet of A4. He read it while Amanda Hunt stared at him and Helena doodled on a pad of paper; normally he would have considered such a short report to be negligent but not this time. Even Marcel Proust would have had trouble stretching it much further, given that the only parts of Daniel Hunt that had remained were his head and neck, his left arm, and his right foot. The history took up more room than the actual post mortem examination. Eventually he looked up and, as he handed it back to Helena, he remarked, "Your brother was quite severely depressed."

"He was improving."

This defiantly.

Of Helena he asked, "What about the fire investigation?"

Another report was handed over the desk. This one included a photo album, but there were no sea views or smiling, sunburnt faces. Eisenmenger spent a long time first in reading, then in minute inspection of the pictures. "The body was discovered in the morning?" he asked.

"When the carer came in to prepare his breakfast."

"Who was that?"

Helena read from a paper in front of her. "Emma Bell."

"Was the house secure?"

"Yes."

Helena asked, "Were there any signs at all of an attempted break-in? Scratched or forced window frames, that kind of thing?"

"The police checked very carefully for any suggestion of tampering and found none."

"Mmm." He was barely aware that he said it, but Amanda Hunt was clearly very sensitive.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Do you?"

"You think I'm being stupid."

He tried to make the denial, the one that he genuinely felt, but she rolled right over him. "Well, I'm not. I don't believe that my brother



burst into flames, and I don't believe it was an accident. I think that somehow somebody killed him, and I want you to prove it."

Helena's intervention was clear and concise. "Or disprove it, Miss Hunt. We can only uncover what's there, whatever you may want to accept."

Briefly surprised, she quickly accepted the truth of this and said, "Of course."

Eisenmenger was back at the fire investigation report. "The remains were found in the middle of the room. Not near a fireplace, nor near any electrical outlets," he observed. "There's no evidence to suggest that any accelerant was used."

Amanda Hunt frowned. "What does that mean?"

"No trace of flammable liquids, that kind of thing."

Helena added, "Despite the police saying nothing officially, the local press have played up the idea of spontaneous combustion fairly strongly."

Eisenmenger said dryly, "Well, you can see why they would."

"They're vultures. They wouldn't leave me alone."

There was silence, a look of deep concentration on Eisenmenger's face, while Amanda Hunt looked at him.

"Well?" she demanded eventually.

"I don't see how it could be murder," he said slowly, aware that it was not what she wanted from him.

"Couldn't someone have knocked him out and then set fire to him?"

Helena said, "John will correct me if I'm wrong, but there was no sign from the remains that your brother had suffered any trauma prior to his death."

"There wasn't much left of my brother from which to draw any conclusions at all." Amanda Hunt pointed this out with some asperity.

Eisenmenger nodded as if to accept this proviso but then said, "But I don't see how it could have been done, not if the house was secure. Were the doors locked, or locked and bolted?"

He could see that she didn't like it as she admitted, "Locked and bolted."

"So even if we postulate that someone let themselves in because they had a key, or your brother let the killer in because he knew them, there's the problem of how they got out again."

Miss Hunt said nothing to this.

Helena inquired, "Do I take it that the police have checked out the alibis of the carers for the night that your brother died?"

"The police tell me that they're happy that none of the carers could have gone back to the house. He was last seen alive on the

evening of the third—the woman who lives opposite saw him through the window of his front room at about eight—and all of them have alibis from then until the morning of the fourth when his remains were discovered.”

“By Emma Bell.”

She nodded. Then she asked, “Anyway, how much can a pathologist tell from . . . from the little that was left? Supposing he was shot . . . or stabbed . . . or poisoned, even.”

Eisenmenger explained, “Generally speaking, shooting and stabbing don’t leave a clean environment. As for poisoning, the post-mortem tissue samples revealed nothing on analysis.”

She looked deflated, and Eisenmenger felt guilty. Helena asked, “How much did your brother weigh?”

She didn’t understand the question. “About twelve stone, I should think.”

“Not markedly overweight, then?”

“Not at all.”

Helena looked at Eisenmenger, who shrugged almost imperceptibly. She turned back to Amanda Hunt. “I know it’s unsatisfactory, but there really is no indication that there was anything criminal about your brother’s death.”

She nodded slowly, looking not at them but at the floor. Helena turned to Eisenmenger, who hesitated briefly before saying, “But I suppose we could spend a day just looking into it . . .”

She brightened at once. “You will?”

“We can’t promise anything,” Helena pointed out quickly.

But that didn’t matter, and as Helena showed her out of the office, she had the feeling that they were just postponing Amanda Hunt’s disappointment.

“What do you think?” asked Helena as she sat back down.

“I can’t see that it’s murder,” said Eisenmenger. “And, as I don’t believe that it’s spontaneous combustion, that leaves an accident.”

“But he didn’t smoke, and there was no evidence of a candle, and nothing to suggest an electrical fire.”

He laughed. “I bet you dinner at a decent restaurant that he smoked. Whatever he wanted his sister to believe.”

“He wasn’t overweight.”

“But we know that he drank.”

“So no great mystery, then?”

“I doubt it.”

“Mrs. Bell?”

No more than twenty-five, she bore enough worry on her face

for two lifetimes. She looked startled to be addressed by two strangers, clearly felt that she was guilty of something—anything and everything, even. She wore a simple housecoat in fine blue and white stripes, black stockings, and flat shoes. She was just coming out of a house, not far from where Daniel Hunt had lived and died.

"Yes?" This timorously.

"Do you mind if we have a word?"

"What about?"

"About Mr. Hunt. My name's Helena Flemming; this is my colleague, Dr. John Eisenmenger."

If anything, the look of concern deepened, became almost distressed. "I . . ."

"It is important. I'm a solicitor, here on behalf of Mr. Hunt's sister."

"How did you find me?" She was looking more and more alarmed with every second that passed.

"The company you work for said you'd be here."

"I don't know . . . I haven't got long. I've got to get on to my next client."

"This won't take long."

Her head was shaking, although whether it was a sign of disagreement or a sign of fear wasn't obvious. Eisenmenger said gently, "We know that it was distressing for you to find Mr. Hunt like that. But if you could just answer a few questions, his sister would be very, very grateful."

It was a sunny, humid morning, and they went to a park bench on the small green opposite. She sat down with Helena beside her and Eisenmenger leaning against a tree. The traffic was still loud on the main road, and although they were in the middle of the city, there was an unmistakable rural air; though open fields and woodland were a long way away.

Helena asked, "Did you know Mr. Hunt well?"

"Oh yes. He was one of my favorites. Some of them are a bit nasty—they can't help it because they're old and losing their marbles—but he wasn't like that. He was quiet and some days he was really, really down, but on his good days he was quite charming. He used to ask after my little girl."

"How long have you been helping with his care?"

"About three years."

"Did he smoke?"

She shook her head, but there was an undoubted hesitation. "No."

Eisenmenger smiled. "Not officially, I take it."

She smiled. "He didn't want his sister to know, but he used to have the occasional one—usually a roll-up."

Helena could feel smugness radiating from Eisenmenger like sunshine on cold skin. "Did he drink at all?" was his next question.

She was pained by saying, "He'd begun to drink. Just recently."

Eisenmenger said nothing, but Helena imagined he was silently crowing. She failed to look at him as she asked, "Why? Was there a reason?"

"He'd become very agitated recently. I thought he was worried about something, but he wouldn't tell me what."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"Not that I know of, but I wouldn't, would I? I mean, I only used to see him for half an hour a few times a week."

"When you spoke to him on the third—what was he like that evening?"

"Like he had been for some time. Preoccupied. Depressed. He hadn't bothered to get dressed all day—he'd taken to doing that."

"Was he drunk?"

She hesitated. "He'd been drinking, but I wouldn't have called him drunk."

Eisenmenger asked suddenly, "Do you think he ever saw anyone except you and your fellow carers? His sister tells us that he had few friends."

She said flatly, "I don't think he had any." She then conceded, "He never spoke of anyone, anyway. I'm sure he never went out, either."

Helena watched Eisenmenger, knew that he was ticking boxes, joining dots, working his way through a maze. He asked, "Were there any candles or nightlights in the house?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Hurricane lamps?"

"No."

"Paraffin heaters?"

"No, nothing like that."

He paused, and Helena was about to ask about Daniel Hunt's epilepsy when he suddenly asked, "What about your colleagues? There are five of you in this area, is that right?"

She nodded.

"So how does it work? Do you all visit each client?"

"That's right. Some of the older people we have to get up, bathe, and dress, as well as feed three times a day; it works out that we tend to visit every two days."

Eisenmenger lapsed once more into silence, and this time Helena just waited for him to speak again.

"Tell me about your colleagues."

"They're a great crowd. We get on really well."

"You've worked together for a long time, have you?"

"Oh yes . . . well, all except Audrey."

"Audrey?"

"Audrey Ramsay. She hasn't worked for the company as long as the rest of us."

"Was she working for the company when Daniel Hunt died?"

"Yes, I think so. She'd just started."

"How long before?"

Emma wasn't particularly bright, but she was careful and conscientious and she wanted to get the answer as near to accurate as she could manage. Her expression was pained, as if she had a suppurating boil somewhere; she appeared actually to be chewing her tongue.

"It must have been nine or ten weeks."

"But you get on well with her?"

"Oh yes. She's really nice; quite sweet, actually."

Eisenmenger was nodding thoughtfully, and perhaps he might have continued to question Emma Bell, but Helena was suddenly struck by suspicion.

"Tell me, Emma. You said that Daniel Hunt had been recently agitated, that he'd recently begun to drink. Did that start about the time that Audrey Ramsay started to care for him?"

She frowned and was silent for a while before, "Well, yes. Now you come to mention it, I suppose it was."

**I**t was a small, semidetached Victorian house, surprisingly unspoiled. Only the boarded windows spoke of what had happened inside. The small front garden had been laid to gravel, the external paintwork not too flaked; at first glance it appeared to be quite smart, but it didn't take the third glance to spot that it had been lacking any care for a long time now.

They didn't want to go in, feeling the superstitious dread that the living feel for the places of the dead, but Eisenmenger resolutely put the key that Amanda Hunt had given them into the lock.

They were in a small hallway, the stairway running away from them on the left, the kitchen ahead, two doors to the right. It was the archetypal British home, one of millions. They smiled uncertainly at each other, looked briefly around the hall, then went through the first door on the right.

Someone's died here. There will be traces, almost certainly a scent . . .

And there was an odor. It wasn't strong but it was there, and it

was the first thing that they noticed. It wasn't immediately repulsive, but it was at once different, with familiarity becoming intrusive and somehow anonymously unpleasant. It might have been because they knew what had happened, knew that the slightly incongruous rug in the center of the room covered the sight of Daniel Hunt's death, and could see the smoke stains on the ceiling, casting into curiously arresting relief the ornate plaster moldings. The wall to the room at the back had been knocked down to make a large space.

It was simply furnished. A small two-seater sofa and two armchairs around a fireplace in which there was a two-bar electric fire, a dining table in the window at the back that was accompanied by three matching chairs, a sideboard, a television with a third armchair in front of it, and a small table on which was a lamp. There were various ornaments, mostly old and cheap mementos, as well as a scattering of photographs. Helena recognized a younger Amanda Hunt in one; she was with a young boy and an older man and woman—presumably Daniel and his parents. On the sideboard was a tray on which stood two tumblers and a carafe of clear liquid. One of the tumblers was turned upright; Eisenmenger noticed that it had a brown stain at the bottom.

He went first to the fireplace. Crouching down, he checked the flex of the fire, then reached across to the wall socket and switched it on. It started to glow fairly quickly with no sign of malfunction. He stood up, then took the stopper from the carafe and inhaled deeply, then repeated this action with both tumblers; it was water, not alcohol. He went then to the rest of the electrical outlets examining them minutely, testing them all by plugging in the table lamp. He examined the windows, then the two light fittings that hung from the ceiling. He checked—sniffed even—the single ashtray (a souvenir of Yarmouth), as well as the wastepaper basket. Then he paused in one corner of the room, looking around. While this was going on, Helena searched through the letters, bills, and other documents that she found in the drawers of the sideboard.

"Anything?" she asked, looking up when she became aware of the silence that had settled around the room.

He continued his scrutiny, and she had to strain to hear him say, "Not yet."

She sighed. "Nothing here either."

He moved forward into the center of the room, standing just by the rug. "He would come in here in the evening to watch television, sitting in this chair. He would have sat here and had a drink and probably a cigarette or two." Eisenmenger went across to the rug that covered the site where Daniel Hunt had burned to death.



It was behind the chair, about a meter and a half away. "Yet the tumbler is on the sideboard with the remains of a whiskey drink in it."

He stared down at the rug. Helena got up, closed the sideboard, and came to stand beside him, knowing what he was thinking. He looked across at her. "Shall we?"

She shrugged and he bent down, picked up the corner of the rug, and flipped it back.

She supposed that she had been expecting far worse than she saw—perhaps the burned outline of a human being in the midst of an agonizing death—but there was nothing as emotive as that. The burned area was large and irregular—at its center deep enough to consume not only the carpet but full thickness floorboard—but it was no recognizable pattern. Surrounding it were smaller patches of ash, some down to wood, some merely singes in the pile. Eisenmenger reached out to touch the center of the patch, then examined his fingertips, sniffing them; Helena fought a brief spasm of nausea. To the carpet Eisenmenger said, "Somebody's Hoovered." He sounded disappointed.

"Do you blame them?"

He considered. "No," he decided. "I suppose not. Still, it's a shame."

The odor had grown stronger, belittling the attempts that had been made to eradicate the past. Eisenmenger felt in his jacket pocket and brought out a penknife, which he opened.

"What are you doing?" Helena asked this even though it was quite obvious. He was cutting holes in the carpet.

"To be absolutely honest, I don't know," he admitted, as he sawed with the blade, cutting a semicircular segment about two centimeters across from the edge of the main burn. "I suppose you could say that I'm covering the bases."

He didn't touch his sample. Leaving it where it was, he repeated the exercise at the edge of one of the peripheral burn marks. He asked Helena, "Could you find an envelope in the sideboard to put these in?"

She had no trouble in locating a long buff envelope, and he picked the carpet pieces up on the penknife blade and slipped them into it.

"What now?" she asked.

He replaced the rug, stood up. "We'd better check all the drawers and cupboards."

"What are we looking for?"

He didn't know. "Anything."

"Or everything?"

He smiled. "That too."

She went into the room at the back. After a few minutes, she called out to him, "There are some capsules here."

"What kind?"

"Painkillers or something. They must be old, they're going off, or something."

Eisenmenger stopped abruptly what he was doing and walked across to the bedroom doorway. "Can I see?"

She brought the bottle out to him. He unscrewed the lid and examined the contents by tipping some into his palm. They were entericoated capsules, half white and half red. Some of them were covered in an oily sheen, as if they had sweated. "How odd," he murmured.

"What is it?"

"They've two years to go before they're out of date. They must be practically new."

"Perhaps they're a faulty batch."

He stared at the capsules for a moment, then carefully put them back into the bottle without saying anything. He placed the bottle on the mantelpiece, his face still pensive as he did so.

That evening they met with Amanda Hunt again.

"Well?"

She was clearly desperate for something, anything to explain how her brother had died.

"Nothing definitive, I'm afraid."

He had tried to sound deadpan, not too enthusiastic. To no avail.

"But . . . ?"

"What tablets was your brother on?"

"He took an anticonvulsant—Epanutin, I think—also an antidepressant, one of the SSRIs; and some sort of painkiller—I forget which."

"Why was he taking painkillers?"

"He suffered from severe migraines. It was another consequence of the accident."

"And the carers dispensed the tablets?"

"Not the painkillers. He took those when he needed them."

He nodded, and in the absence of any more questions from him, she asked, "Is there something about his medication?"

He shook his head. "I'm just trying to get a picture of how your brother lived his life."

Her face, held into a tight smile by expectancy, relaxed into disappointment. "Oh."

Helena, until then silent, said, "It must have been a very bad accident."

"It was. As I said, he was in a coma after it."

"Before the accident, what did he do?"

"He ran his own business, selling CDs and DVDs on the Internet."

"Was it successful?"

"Very."

"What happened to it?"

Her attitude changed, subtly but noticeably. She said dismissively, "He sold it."

Helena didn't look at Eisenmenger although she could sense that he too had heard something in her reply.

Eisenmenger had his hands clasped, forefingers pressed together as he tapped the point of his chin. "Does the name Audrey Ramsay mean anything to you?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Should it?"

"Just a thought."

It was Helena who asked, "What happened in the accident?"

"What does that matter?" The question was peculiarly defensive, the tone even more so.

Helena smiled; she was well used to smiling at clients, no matter what they said or how they said it. "Forgive me, Miss Hunt, but you've asked us to look into the death of your brother, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"You suspect that the death might be suspicious, don't you?"

"That's a possibility, I suppose."

"So we need to know if there's anything in your brother's past that might have a bearing on his death. Generally speaking, people don't just kill someone without a reason."

"I really can't see what bearing the accident might have on this."

Eisenmenger had been listening intently to this exchange, and he said now, "Was anyone killed in the accident?"

Amanda Hunt's expression changed quickly from angry to hesitant, then to something that might have been shame. Certainly she dropped her head as she said in a low voice, "Yes."

Helena suggested, "Perhaps you'd better tell us the details."

**D**aniel Hunt had been successful enough to buy and run a Porsche 911, even though at the age of twenty-four the insurance had been cripplingly high. He had enjoyed his success as only a single man without any responsibilities could. He had had, it appeared, an essentially hedonistic lifestyle, and perhaps the gods had grown jealous.

The accident had happened on a seemingly innocuous stretch of road that ran through a small village called Corse, situated on the edge of the Cotswolds. Here the terrain was flat, and for a long distance the road ran straight, but at its end there was an unexpectedly sharp turn, first to the right, then to the left. Daniel Hunt had spent the evening enjoying a drink with friends at the Corse Lawn Hotel and was driving northward toward Worcester when he miscalculated the bends, lost control, and collided with a car heading south.

"What happened to the occupants of the other car?"

Her whole attitude had become confessional, hushed, ashamed, as if she had been responsible for the tragedy. It was painful just to listen, let alone to have to pose the questions that seemed to cut deeply into her.

"It was a young mother and her four-year-old daughter. They'd been to visit the grandparents for the day."

She paused, and neither of them even moved.

"They both died." Her tone was resigned, as if she had come to terms with this terrible thing.

And then abruptly she began to snivel—not cry, just snivel. They both found this peculiarly shocking, as if she were doing something outrageous. Into their embarrassment, she said suddenly, "She was pregnant."

She looked up at them and repeated this. "The mother was pregnant. Three people died, not two."

What was there to say in the face of such calamity? Neither Helena nor Eisenmenger had any idea.

Blowing her nose she added, "When Daniel found out, it was effectively the death of him. It was that more than the physical injuries that tortured him."

"Had Daniel been . . . ?"

But Eisenmenger's question was never to be completed because Helena said loudly over him, "Well, I think that's all we need to know for now, Miss Hunt."

Eisenmenger, somewhat taken aback, could only stare. Their visitor nodded slowly, smiled faintly at them, and said, "I hope it helps." She sounded bitter.

When she had gone, he asked, "What's going on?" He was genuinely puzzled, at a loss to comprehend why the meeting had been so abruptly terminated.

She sighed in exasperation. John Eisenmenger was not without compassion—far from it—but he was without a single whit of common sense. She explained, "Couldn't you see how distressed she was? The whole thing was clearly a family disgrace. She didn't

even want to mention it in the first place, let alone go into all the grisly details."

"I realize that, but we still have to know more about it."

"It was a fatal road traffic collision. It won't be hard to find the details."

He drew in breath, perhaps ready to argue his position, but the bitterness of experience closed it again, and he said nothing more.

Helena was proved right. The death of a four year old would have been good copy, but the icing on a tasty media cake was the demise of her pregnant mother, and the cherry on top was the conviction of a young Internet entrepreneur whose level of blood alcohol had been just over the limit for driving.

Four years for causing death by dangerous driving, he had served just under three years.

Until he had finished, Eisenmenger read through the newspaper reports that Helena handed to him without comment. Then he looked up at her. "A little more to the story than we've been led to believe."

"But is it relevant?"

"Ah. Therein lies an interesting question."

He turned back to the reports. Helena remarked, "We need to find out more about the woman who was killed."

"Jessica Strauss. Yes, we do."

"Her husband would have a pretty strong motive, and according to the reports, he was pretty vocal in his condemnation of the leniency of the sentence."

"He was, wasn't he?"

Kenneth Strauss had, unsurprisingly, been devastated by the loss of his entire family, and had stated in no uncertain terms his dissatisfaction with Daniel Hunt's treatment at the hands of the law.

"Shall I take care of that?"

She had lost Eisenmenger, a not uncommon occurrence. He was looking toward but not actually at the documents she had given him; his thoughts were busy elsewhere. She asked patiently, "And what will you do?"

A moment to bring himself back to her, another moment to play her question back in his head, then, "I think it's worthwhile doing a little analysis on the carpet. The fire department would have looked for things like petrol and paraffin, but I think it might be interesting to be a little more fundamental than that."

She didn't know what he meant, but before she could ask, he added, "And I think we need to talk to his other carers."

"Especially Mrs. Ramsay. She was perhaps the last person to see

him alive, and don't forget, it was when she started as a carer that he apparently became uneasy."

That last made him pause. He said thoughtfully, "You know, if I were going to commit the perfect murder, I'd make sure that it was a random act."

"What does that mean?"

"If you were the murderer, you wouldn't want to be connected with the act in any way, would you? You'd want it to happen well away from you, both in time and space."

"Of course, if I could arrange it like that."

He said nothing for a second before, "So you'd try to kill someone by something that occurred at random, like a bolt of lightning or something."

"You're not suggesting . . ."

He shook his head. "Just an illustration."

She considered. "I suppose if you could do it like that, that would be a pretty foolproof method."

And, as if to demonstrate that he was constitutionally the most infuriating entity on the planet, he said then, "But would it?"

"What?"

"The trouble with random acts is that you can't control when they happen."

He had lost her completely. Helena had a quick temper and it was in good form then. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He didn't help the cause of his personal safety when he said only, "I'm not sure."

Having sent the samples of carpet to be analyzed by a forensic laboratory, Eisenmenger turned to finding out a little more about the people who had had most contact with Daniel Hunt. He called at the offices of Welcare, which occupied the second floor of a small office block opposite a public swimming bath. It was a run-down and uncomfortable spot where there was fifty years' worth of grime, where the shops were poorly stocked, and where dust and litter seemed to interbreed.

There was no lift, so Eisenmenger had the pleasure of trudging up the stairs past scuffs on the emulsion, flattened and hardened chewing gum patches on the steps, and a broken office chair on the first floor landing. Welcare shared the floor with a company that imported plastic cutlery from China and a firm of accountants. To judge from the real estate, no one seemed to be enjoying an economic boom.

The receptionist was short and might have been reported by an ungenerous correspondent as overweight. A more forthright wit-



ness might have used the term "fat." She was perhaps sixty and hobbled badly when she returned to the desk as Eisenmenger entered the office and caught her in the act of filing something. She smiled sweetly and looked at him through glasses that were presumably functional but that failed to do anything for her aesthetic appeal.

Eisenmenger explained the reason for his presence.

"Oh yes. Poor Mr. Hunt!"

"Obviously, the people who had closest contact with him were his carers, your employees."

"I suppose so."

Emma Bell had been able to supply him with names but not where they lived. "I know who they are, but I was wondering if you could give me a list of their addresses."

Her face, previously full of expectancy, was suddenly a thing of uncertainty. "I don't know . . ."

"You see, I need to talk to them. I think it's important to know how he was in those last few days."

After some consideration she decided, "Yes, I can see that, but it's not up to me."

"No?"

"You'll have to speak to Mr. Menten."

Mr. Menten was tall and ponderous, dry and gray; he was also officious.

"I really don't see that. I can help you."

"I appreciate that there are problems of confidentiality . . ."

"Very great problems, Mr. Eisenmenger."

Eisenmenger rode manfully over the mislabeling and, with what he hoped was a persuasive smile, said, "But I am looking into a suspicious death."

A frown; it was the kind of frown that signaled clearly that he was enjoying being obstructive. "Is it, though?"

Eisenmenger rode over this: "It's just that I have a problem with people bursting spontaneously into flames." He smiled.

Mr. Menten didn't. "The police didn't think it was suspicious."

"No."

"The house was locked, I understand."

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bell tells me that he had been smoking."

"He had the occasional roll-up."

It was Mr. Menten's turn to smile. "There you are, then."

And that was, effectively, the end of the interview.

Eisenmenger sought solace with Mr. Menten's secretary. He thought it potentially worthwhile to dig up any gossip that he

could on Daniel Hunt's carers. "Mr. Menten's a stickler for the rules." He tried to sound not unadmiring.

"Oh yes. He's definitely that."

"Emma said that he's a very good boss."

"He's marvelous." Having produced this unqualified praise, it seemed to him that she almost sighed. He sat firmly upon the incredulity that struggled energetically to make its way to his features.

"Emma was telling me that you've had problems recruiting recently."

This was a lie, but he operated using a relative morality system.

"We always have problems. It's the low pay, you see."

"You were lucky to get Mrs. Ramsay, then."

"That's what we rely on, people like her."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The pay's so poor that the only people we attract are ladies like Audrey Ramsay who don't need the money, and young girls who . . ." She failed to come to the end of the sentence, and he was forced to offer a prompt.

"Who?"

She looked down as if embarrassed; he guessed that this was artifice. She said tentatively, "Well, you see, most of them aren't very good."

"Oh, I see."

"They're slapdash, and we've had a few who, we think, might have been dishonest."

She spoke as if she would really rather not have been put in this position, yet also he suspected that these failures of the younger generation had only confirmed what she already knew.

"But not Emma?"

"Oh no. Not Emma. She's very conscientious, kind . . . the clients love her."

"And do they love Mrs. Ramsay?"

Caught by surprise by this inquiry, she replied after a brief pause, "Yes, I think they do."

"I know that Daniel Hunt certainly thought highly of her."

Another lie but, hey-ho.

"That's nice to know." She smiled.

Which didn't help him, but he remained a thing of absolute patience and asked, "How long has she been working here?"

"About four months, I think."

"This is her first care job, is it?"

"That's right. She's retired, you see. Wanted to do something that would occupy her time and that would do some good. Her

husband died quite recently and she's got no family, you see."

He nodded in understanding. "I suppose you get a lot of turnover of staff."

"A fair amount. Especially the younger ones."

"It must be quite upsetting for some of your clients if the faces change all the time. I know that Daniel said as much."

Her face formed a frown. "Did he? But he had had the same group of carers—except for Audrey Ramsay—for a long time now, I think. At least a year."

Eisenmenger rushed to smooth over this slight crack in the otherwise smooth-surfaced lie he had concocted. "Oh, I know . . . he meant before this present group of people."

She understood. "Yes, we did go through a tricky patch a little while ago."

He was getting nowhere and was therefore forced to push his luck as far and as fast as he could. He leaned over the desk and in a confidential manner said, "I know that this is irregular, but Amanda Hunt, Daniel's sister, wanted to express her appreciation to Mrs. Ramsay. I don't suppose you could let me have her address, could you?"

"Well, I can't, you see. Mr. Menten wouldn't like it."

"He doesn't need to know."

She considered, then, "But if she wants to write a letter and leave it here, we can pass it on."

Eisenmenger felt the smile becoming fixed, the muscles around it cramped. "She was hoping to talk to her. I'm sure you'd agree it's far more personal that way."

Yet more consideration, but this time the outcome was better. "Yes, I can see that."

Eyes were cast toward the door of Mr. Menten's office. "Very well. Hold on."

She got up from her desk and hobbled to a filing cabinet in the corner of the room by the window that looked out onto the swimming bath. She returned with a sheet of paper that she showed to Eisenmenger. It was Audrey Ramsay's personnel file. He had just scribbled down the address and returned the sheet to the secretary when Mr. Menten chose to emerge from his office and was less than delighted to see Eisenmenger in conversation with his secretary. There entered into the room a distinctly refrigerated atmosphere as he asked, "Is there anything more we can do for you, Mr. Eisenmenger? We are very busy, you know."

The secretary, looking as she might if she had just been caught picking the Pope's pocket, hurriedly covered the sheet of paper

with a box file as Eisenmenger was forced merely to smile and bow his head in apology.

"I was just making small talk with your delightful secretary."

Said secretary dropped her eyes, but not before a blush could be seen making its way onto her face.

Mr. Menten, less impressed, said, "I don't pay her to make small talk, Mr. Eisenmenger."

Eisenmenger weighed his options and saw the wisdom of leaving without a further word.

Helena was waiting for him when he returned to their flat.

"I think we're onto something," she said at once.

He flopped into a chair, thinking about the beer that was sitting there in the refrigerator not ten meters away. Could he hear it calling out to him, the voice faint but nevertheless almost beyond irresistibility? "You may be, but I can't say that I am."

Helena wasn't listening to what he was saying, nor did she care what he might or might not want from the refrigerator. "Kenneth Strauss was left without a family after the accident, but interestingly, he seems to have recovered fairly quickly. He remarried within the year. He now has two more children and seems to be happily settled in Aberdeen."

It was good to hear that somewhere in the world there was someone who cracked the Life Sucks problem, but Eisenmenger felt unable to raise much joy at this nugget of news. "I'm none the wiser."

"He wasn't the only one affected by the tragedy, though." She left it there, tantalizing him.

He played his part. "Who else was there?"

"The parents of Jessica Strauss. She was an only daughter—"

The answer flashed through his head a fraction of a second before she told him.

"—and her maiden name was Ramsay."

He sat up, galvanized. "Bloody hell!"

Enjoying the reaction—her grin was face splitting—she nodded and went on. "Her parents were Audrey and William Ramsay."

He was staring at her, but she knew that his mind was a long way off, that it was sprinting through connections and possibilities and correlations and implications. She said, "I think we can guess what Daniel Hunt became disturbed about in the last few weeks of his life."

Eisenmenger didn't reply, didn't even hear.

Helena went on, "Interestingly, I've traced a newspaper interview with the Ramsays some days after the trial ended. The father,

William, was especially angry and bitter about Daniel Hunt. Here."

She handed him a photocopy, which he took absently. His eyes found it only slowly. In it William Ramsay was vitriolic about Daniel Hunt, claiming that no punishment save the death penalty was good enough for him. Audrey Ramsay's voice was absent from the story, as if she fed through her husband.

Helena said, "William Ramsay would make a fairly strong suspect."

"He would . . ."

She caught the tone. "What is it?"

"William Ramsay died of a heart attack a year ago."

She sighed. "Oh great."

Almost without thinking, he rose and fetched that beer from the refrigerator, then sat back down. Helena said nothing as she fetched her own glass of wine. They sat in silence for a while until Eisenmenger asked, "What did William Ramsay do for a living?"

"He was a teacher. Both he and his wife taught at a boarding school until he died."

"Do we know what they taught?"

"Does it matter?"

A shrug. "I don't know."

She sipped her wine and with some resignation said, "I'll try to find out."

The results from the forensics lab came in the post first thing the next day. As Eisenmenger read through them, he found them at first perplexing and apparently inexplicable. He reread the report, then put it down and stared at it.

Helena, noticing the expression on his face over the breakfast table, asked, "What's wrong?"

The answer she received was not entirely informative. "I don't know." A pause, then, "But that's not the point."

"What is, then?"

He smiled. "I may not yet know what is wrong, but at least now I know for certain that something is wrong." Before she could explore this Delphic utterance further, he asked abruptly, "Have you still got the key to Daniel Hunt's place?"

"It's at the office."

"Good. I need to take another look."

"He was murdered."

Eisenmenger announced this without preamble, coming into Helena's office at the earliest opportunity that her client list would allow. Startled, she asked, "You're sure?"

"Here."

He held out the reports to her. She read through them then shook her head, sighed, and looked up at him. "You'll have to translate."

"The ash from the carpet samples contained high levels of potassium hydroxide. High levels."

"I can see that, but so what? Is it a poison?"

"Almost certainly it's poisonous, but that's not the significance. Daniel Hunt wasn't poisoned. Somebody found a way to get him to swallow an incendiary bomb."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He was talking half to himself now, shaking his head at the possibilities he now saw. "My Lord, it's absolutely astounding. It shows a level of ingenious cruelty that is quite simply terrifying."

Helena had almost to shout. "What does?"

He stopped, surprised, came back to her. "How the death was achieved."

Patiently, Helena prompted, "Which was?"

But he was off again. "It was the painkillers. Entericoated capsules, designed to pass through the stomach and into the small intestine before they dissolve. Then once there, once inside the deepest part—"

"John, for God's sake, tell me what you know!"

Brought back to reality, with a brief apology he breathed deeply and produced from his pocket the bottle of painkillers she had found in Daniel Hunt's house. As he explained he took four out and put them in an empty wastepaper basket in the center of the room. Helena watched in bafflement. From her desk he took her bottle of drinking water and poured some onto the capsules, then stood well back. "Somebody tampered with them. They broke them open, poured out the active drug, and packed them with metallic potassium in a suspension of paraffin oil. That's the only way to handle the stuff, and it explains the tiny oil droplets on the surface of the capsules."

"And what does metallic potassium do?"

"It's the pure form of the element. It's very rare in nature because it is incredibly reactive. It has a violent exothermic reaction with oxygen and with water."

At last she began to see. "So that when the tablets dissolved inside the intestine . . ."

He nodded, then went to the wall by the door where there was a small carbon dioxide fire extinguisher. "As soon as it came into the contact with the water of the intestinal contents, it burned at a temperature of several thousand degrees. What's more, in the



reaction, potassium hydroxide is formed and gaseous hydrogen is liberated. That fuels the fire, making it even hotter. At that temperature, the body fat would ignite. Once it starts, it wouldn't stop until almost nothing was left."

She felt stunned by the words. Stunned and nauseated. "That's horrible."

He nodded slowly, staring into her eyes. "Metallic potassium is very rare and very difficult to get hold of. You can't just ring someplace up and order it. In fact, I can think of only one place that it might be relatively easily obtained."

With a suddenness that made them both jump, there was a loud fizzing noise and white-hot flames suddenly erupted from the bin. There were tiny clanging noises, as if projectiles were pelting the bin. Even from three meters away, the heat was intense. Eisenmenger aimed the fire extinguisher and doused the flames; it proved to be difficult.

She asked gently, "Where would you get hold of metallic potassium?" Her tone was peculiar.

He looked up at her. "A school chemistry lab."

She murmured, "Ah."

His next question was almost asked with his breath held. "Did you find out what the Ramsays used to teach?"

She nodded. "William Ramsay taught mathematics."

"And Audrey?"

She sighed. "Chemistry."

Audrey Ramsay lived in a small and neat bungalow in a suburb on the eastern side of the city. Eisenmenger and Helena drove along street upon street of similar dwellings before they reached their destination. Agedness seemed to be suspended in the atmosphere, to be seeping into their bones as they breathed. When Eisenmenger looked sideways at Helena he half expected her to have gray hair and slack skin.

"Mrs. Audrey Ramsay?"

Her hair, Helena decided, was dyed. There were bags under her eyes, and she projected tiredness in an almost despondent way.

"Yes?"

Helena made the introductions. "We're here in connection with a Mr. Daniel Hunt. He was a—"

"I know who he was."

The degree of calm was chilling. She stood to one side. "Come in."

The room was cluttered but clean. Eisenmenger noted a picture of a small girl playing on a swing being pushed by an elderly man;

next to that was a picture of a married couple with the same young child, the setting a birthday party; the same couple on their wedding day made up the triptych. When they were seated he asked gently, "Is that your daughter's family?"

She didn't look at the picture. She said merely, "Yes."

She didn't ask how he knew.

Helena said, "We're just trying to clear something up. A curious coincidence, probably."

Helena suddenly found that Audrey Ramsay was staring at her, expressionlessly. It was unnerving, as if she were trying a touch of mesmerism, but before Helena could say anything, Mrs. Ramsay said simply, "No coincidence."

For a moment nonplussed, Helena, now returning the stare, replied slowly, "You killed Daniel Hunt."

She nodded. There was a hint of pride as she asked, "Have you worked out how?"

Eisenmenger reached into his pocket and brought out the capsules. She looked at them, then said, "I retired three years ago, but I still do a bit of supply teaching when they're short of staff. That wasn't paying enough, so I took the care job as a way of making ends meet. He was the last person I expected to meet. Most of the people I helped to look after are in their eighties and nineties, but there he was." Her sigh was deep and it modulated slightly as if tears were somewhere nearby. "I thought I'd forgiven him, but . . ." She broke down.

Eisenmenger asked gently, "You got the potassium from a school, I take it."

She nodded. There was a long pause before she found her voice. "I saw the potassium shortly after I'd realized who he was. It took a long time to cut up the potassium and put it in the capsules. A lot of after-hours work in the fume cupboard, but it was worth it."

Eisenmenger's attitude was clinical, as clinical as hers, as he suggested, "You chose the painkillers because he took them intermittently. It might be days, weeks, before he took one again. It was just bad luck that you happened to be the last carer to see him alive; it was more likely that you wouldn't be."

Helena asked, "Why did you go on caring for him?"

She frowned, as if she herself didn't know. "I suppose because I wanted to be somewhere near when it happened, to be a little more involved . . . I don't really know."

"He recognized you, didn't he? Why didn't he say something?"

"He knew that he knew me, but he didn't know from where. I said that I'd used to work in an office near his, when he'd had the Internet company. I could see that he didn't quite believe me, but

he could never place me. We only use our first names to the clients, you see."

"It was a horrible way to kill someone."

She became angry, and Helena found the combination of this and the tears to be almost frightening.

The anger of the wronged.

"My daughter lived for five days with seventy percent burns over her face and upper body. My granddaughter's head was crushed. My unborn grandson—the pathology report kindly sexed the fetus—never even had a life. Those are horrible things to do to anyone."

"An eye for an eye?"

"Hunt's selfishness ended the lives of three people—four, if you count my husband. He was never the same again, never really learned to cope. I have nothing left. What I did to him doesn't even begin to make up for what he did to me."

"He'd only had just a little over the limit."

Her scorn was majestic. "And that makes it all right, does it? Just a little over the limit? Only just broke the law? Only just failed to miss the car, and only just killed three people?"

"He went to prison . . ."

She was becoming angry, her voice rising. "For three years!"

"Yes, I know . . ."

She had had enough of Helena's liberal views, found the taste one of spittle. She shut her up with a brief, "I only wish now that I'd had the courage to watch while it happened."

They were cowed by her certainty.

She stood up and then she sighed. The anger was gone and there remained only contentment.

"Let's go and tell the police what I've done." 🐦

## SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

From "Midnight Blue" (1960)

—Ross Macdonald

It was turning into a bad day for everybody, and I felt the dull old nagging pull of other people's trouble, like a toothache you can't leave alone.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

**T**his month, three gifted writers continue to stretch their characters and their talents in ways that entertain and impress.

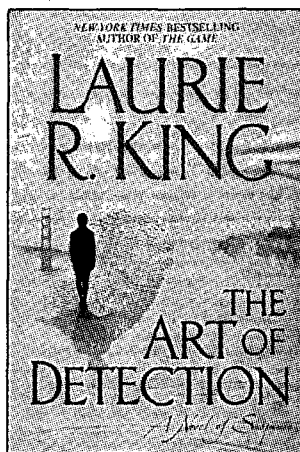
Laurie R. King has been insistent that her historical mystery series of books featuring Mary Russell and Sherlock Holmes are Mary Russell novels, not Sherlock Holmes novels. And her contemporary series featuring Kate Martinelli is a separate creation altogether. What then do you make of **THE ART OF DETECTION** (Bantam, \$24), which ingeniously folds what can only be described as a Sherlock Holmes short story into a Kate Martinelli mystery?

Like the best of King's work, *The Art of Detection* is richly textured with layers that include fascinating historical details about the San Francisco Bay area as well as amusingly barbed portraits of a group of modern Sherlockian enthusiasts.

One of the world's foremost Sherlockians, Victim Philip Gilbert is found dead in one of the inactive battery sites ringing San Francisco Bay, in an emplacement called Battery DuMaurier. Gilbert's prize possession was a manuscript that might be either a clever pastiche or an incredibly valuable unknown Doyle manuscript featuring a Sherlock Holmes American adventure.

Followers of King's Mary Russell series will know that Russell and Holmes visited San Francisco (*Locked Rooms*, 2005), and thus the discovery of a manuscript of a Holmes's story that takes place during his sojourn there is entirely credible. For fans of King's Martinelli series, however, there is the realization that "Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character," thus the frisson of the story within the story as King unveils both Martinelli's murder investigation and the Holmes's manuscript that Gilbert possessed.

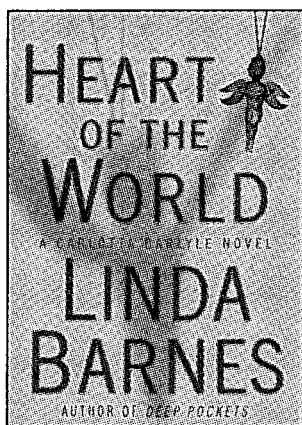
So King's novel is a murder investigation by Holmes within a murder investigation by Martinelli, or else it is an examination of a possibly real, possibly spurious Doyle manuscript and the small but intriguing group of Sherlockians that may include the



murderer Martinelli is seeking. Whichever way the reader chooses to take it is fine entertainment that demonstrates King's consummate ability to continue to stretch the boundaries of genre fiction in new directions.

Linda Barnes has taken her Boston P.I. Carlotta Carlyle into some tight places before, but what is Carlotta doing in Colombia in *HEART OF THE WORLD* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95)?

One of the most appealing aspects of Barnes's Carlotta Carlyle series of novels has been Carlotta's difficult relationship with her "little sister" Paolina. Paolina, a troubled Colombian child has appeared in most of the eleven books in the series, and she and Carlotta have both grown during the relationship. Now Paolina has reached her teen years, and neither her troubled mother, Marta, nor anyone else is as close to her as they should be. So when Paolina goes missing, Marta assumes she's run off to Carlotta, and Carlotta assumes she's run off with her current boyfriend. The



truth is much worse. Paolina has been enticed or kidnapped and is being transported to Colombia. Finding her will test all of Carlotta's skills, all the favors she can call in. And that still might not be enough when Carlotta discovers that Paolina's father, a Colombian rebel and drug lord, may be involved, even though he was presumed to be dead.

Barnes is too savvy to resort to facile clichés as she explores aspects of the U.S. involvement in the drug trade and drug wars in Central America or the complex internal struggles that have riven Colombia. The result is an absorbing adventure, more thriller than mystery that explores pre-Columbian religion and artifacts, American complicity in the troubles besetting Colombia and Carlotta's complex relationships with those closest to her.

This is one of the best in a series where neither hero nor author is afraid to tackle issues or bad guys, and the real winner, every time out, is the reader.

James Sallis is a versatile and prolific author of novels, essays, criticism, and poetry. Even within the genre of crime fiction he shows remarkable range as his two latest offerings attest.

Best known to mystery fans for his Lew Griffin novels, which are set in New Orleans, last year he delivered *Drive* (Poisoned Pen), a small gem of noir fiction set mostly in California and Arizona that packed considerable punch into its emotionally charged 150 pages.

**CRIPPLE CREEK** (Walker, \$23) is Sallis's second mystery featuring reluctant Deputy Sheriff Turner, following *Cypress Grove* in 2004. Set in rural Tennessee, Turner is a former cop, ex-con, ex-social worker whose "temporary" job as a deputy sheriff assisting the new "acting" Sheriff Don Lee has turned into a semipermanent arrangement that seems to suit everyone.—until the sheriff arrests a speeder passing through town. The stranger has a surprise in his trunk—a bag with just over \$200,000 in it. Subsequently, the stranger is busted out of jail, and Don Lee and another citizen are busted up. Turner is not about to let that assault go unanswered, and he pursues the escapee to Memphis, where he discovers a connection to organized crime. Inevitably, Turner's retaliation leads to an escalation of the violence.

Turner's found a haven in Tennessee with a solitude sometimes shared with a girlfriend and sometimes with a family of possums as well. In *Cripple Creek* he learns more about his estranged family, more about his fellow townspeople and most importantly, more about himself.

In lean, spare prose Sallis sketches his hero and the small town whose inhabitants have their idiosyncrasies but are so comfortable in their skins that you feel you would recognize them on sight. The Memphis-area bad guys are not taking on hick lawmen but savvy, if reluctant, warriors. Sallis is one of the most gifted stylists on the mystery scene, and his best novels have an organic wholeness that makes them seem perfect from start to finish. *Cripple Creek* is one of his best.

**ALL POINTS BULLETIN:** From Harcourt this July, Ed McBain's **LEARNING TO KILL** (\$25) serves up twenty-five short stories written between 1952 and 1957, containing themes and techniques that McBain would later develop into the *87th Precinct* titles. • Susan Oleksiw's newest novel, **A MURDEROUS INNOCENCE** (\$25.95), featuring Chief of Police Joe Silva, debuted in hardcover by Five Star this April. • Julia Spencer-Fleming has had a prolific year, with two new titles out this summer from St. Martin's Minotaur: **IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER** (\$6.99, May); and **TO DARKNESS AND TO DEATH** (\$6.99, June). • JoAnna Carl's latest chocolate-covered cozy, **THE CHOCOLATE BRIDAL BASH** (\$6.99), was released by Signet Mystery this August. • Also published by Five Star, **FREEZE ME TENDER** (\$25.95), a Las Vegas caper from Michael A. Black, was out in March.



# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Copyright © Trent Parke/Magnum Photos*

## The Phantom of the Office

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

# BOXES OF HELL

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ELAINE MENGE

**G**etting into the inside corners wasn't easy. Audrey dropped the crayon on her dining table and held the box up to assess her progress. It was ten inches square, pearly white except for the inside walls and bottom on which she'd been scribbling for the past half hour with all the shades of red and orange in her 64 Crayola Crayons carton.

She pulled the lid toward her, inside face up, and ran her forefinger across the rows of crayons. What would the ceiling of hell look like? She wanted the exact color of fire but settled on an ordinary red crayon.

As she worked, a shank of hair dropped across her eyes. Her hair was an unusual grayish brown that lent her an air of maturity beyond her years. She'd found that a valuable quality to project when, in her late twenties, she became head reference librarian at the local college. Despite her youth, people trusted her ability to track down the information they were after, no matter how obscure. Now in her mid thirties, Audrey cherished a secret power in her work. She liked knowing where to find any little fact that could be found, data largely inaccessible to the rest of humanity. She knew exactly what she was doing.

She opened a watercolor tin, dipped a brush into a glass of water, and swished its bristles on the orange rectangle, then tried a spot in one of the hard to reach inner corners. The color took. She began shoving the cheap brush into the corners as if stabbing the enemy.

When the corners were finished, she fitted the lid onto the box. How would he open it for the first time? Would he put the thing on a table, sit down? Or might he stand over it? She smiled and pretended to be Kirk. He's just torn off the paper. Shakes the box—so light, so obviously empty.

Audrey pushed the lid up with her thumbs. The reds and oranges blazed in her face, battling tongues of fire. She could feel the heat.

"Perfect," she said. She'd wanted to create a certain environment.



Drew Morrison

DM

Hell, to be exact—the place where Kirk belonged. Of course, being such a clod, he might toss out this little gem like any piece of junk mail. Pretty fancy junk mail though. He'd have to wonder.

One might not have much effect. But a series?

A loud thump sounded outside, another car door slamming, another rude, gurgling muffler cranked up. She went to the living room windows and opened the miniblinds. As always, two dilapidated vans squatted in front of her house, blocking her view of the street, her neighborhood—one faded blue, the other dirt white, parked dangling tailpipe to dangling tailpipe. To her left, in front of Kirk's house, hunkered a worn Oldsmobile and a wrecked Cadillac, both sporting cracked windshields. The brake light frames on the Caddy were sprung out. Every time someone drove away in that bomb, pieces fell off. Audrey boasted to her coworkers that she could start a spare parts business in her gutter.

On the other side of the vans, the Olds, and Caddy, a rusty gray truck burped and shuddered in the middle of the street. Its driver, the loud door slammer, fool enough to think his geriatric wheels might keep pace with his anger, abruptly hit the gas and shrieked off. Halfway down the block, the engine crapped out.

Audrey would laugh if she didn't feel so trapped. A year ago, she'd taken a big step and bought a house in this modest neighborhood on Jewels Avenue, but hadn't enjoyed it one month before Kirk moved into the rental property next door. Her beef wasn't just the vans, bombed-out cars and boats, or the constant stream of well-heeled and not-so-well-heeled customers coming to pick up recreational drugs. Living next to Kirk was like battling a case of chronic acne. Once one problem area slacked off, a new zit popped up. For days it would be quiet, then for months she'd be awakened by shouting in Kirk's back yard—Kirk himself, usually—yelling at Brown Dog. If his chocolate Lab were yellow, she guessed he'd call him Yellow Dog. At least Kirk knew his colors.

Brown Dog was barking now. Audrey went into her bedroom and raised a slat at the window, stood on tiptoe. Abandoned among the weeds were two pirogues, scores of white plastic buckets, stacks of lumber, metal scaffolding. A pen occupied the middle of the yard, and Brown Dog stood at its near end on his hind legs. His front paws beat the fencing as he barked at a squirrel coolly perched on Audrey's pecan tree.

Brown Dog wasn't too bad when he stayed in his pen at night, but lately—and this was the newest problem—Kirk and his girlfriend left the house around midnight, and when they did, Kirk let Brown Dog loose on the front porch. From the minute Kirk left until the time he returned from his late shift as bartender at a

local dive, around four A.M., Brown Dog barked at anything that moved. Audrey hadn't enjoyed a full night's sleep in weeks.

Doris, the older lady who lived on the other side of Kirk, also complained. Kirk explained to her that he needed to leave Brown Dog out front to guard his house. Protect his stash is more like it, Audrey responded to that bit of news. Kirk didn't realize what a wasted effort it was either. Any moron could bribe that animal with a bologna sandwich, and Brown Dog would give him the keys to the front door.

Kirk's voice boomed. Audrey sneered behind the blinds. There he was, swaggering into the yard. To hear his voice you'd think him the usual sloppy Louisiana redneck with a pot belly and torn undershirt, but Kirk was always nicely turned out in pressed Western-style shirts, tight slacks, and polished cowboy boots. To look at him, you wouldn't think this person kept three air conditioner units on his front porch or that he'd once nailed a live speckled trout to his door.

A friend of Audrey's, upon seeing Kirk once, proclaimed him cute. Audrey said she'd be happy to fix the two of them up, except that closing-in-on-forty Kirk liked his girls extra petite and just the legal side of underage. His current romance, Star, was twenty and looked sixteen. At least that's what the lady next door said.

Star. What a name, Audrey thought, almost feeling sorry for the slight, pretty girl when she happened to catch a glimpse of her going up Kirk's front walkway. She had such an avid, yet uncertain expression in her eyes, was so obviously infatuated with Kirk, and too young to know better.

Audrey hadn't been much older than Star when she met Bret in graduate school and fell in toxic love. Of course Bret, a comparative lit major, was nothing like Kirk. They met at a philological club meeting, the speaker's topic, Sophocles' *Antigone*. They dated. She liked him well enough, but if he never called again, she wouldn't miss a beat. Then, one day as she walked across campus on the way to class, she happened to catch sight of Bret about twenty yards ahead. He emerged from Greenlaw Hall into the sunlight and paused on the elevated steps. She was ready to call out a hello but instead simply watched him as he adjusted a book under his arm and calmly surveyed the landscape. His eyes didn't appear concerned to see anything or anyone in particular. He was magnificently aloof, utterly inaccessible. His dusty blond hair reflected the sun's fresh morning rays. Audrey became acutely aware of being a mere observer. It was as if, suddenly, she didn't exist.

From that moment, she was hopelessly smitten.

In time, her face betrayed her, just as Star's was doing now. That avid, uncertain, hanging-onto-every-word face. It took awhile, but once Audrey's unconditional devotion became obvious, detached Bret ran for the hills.

So Audrey felt a connection to Star, as she did for her own younger self who'd suffered so much after the break-up with Bret. But just as often, Audrey detested the girl—the little fool—who more than once happened to be the one to pick up the phone when Audrey called to complain about the noise, the dog, the vans. With a world-weary tone nearly as vacant as Kirk's, Star answered, "You'll have to talk to Kirk. That's his business. I don't know anything about it. I'm just visiting."

Now, with pinpoint beams of focused hatred, Audrey spied Kirk through the blinds as he slapped heavy-handed pats onto Brown Dog's happily panting, empty head. She, too, had once thought Kirk good looking—until the first beer can landed on her lawn.

And then there was the issue of Kirk's minions. A whole troop of people slaved for him. They mowed his lawn, did odd jobs. Once a month, three young women in tie-dyed tops and short, severely distressed denim skirts drove up in a gray bomb and cleaned his house. He paid them well, she'd heard, no doubt with his cocaine earnings. (Probably handed out baggies of the stuff for bonuses.) The most annoying thing about these women was that they obviously weren't doing the job just for cash. They exuded an attitude, almost joyous of helping Kirk. From the moment they arrived and marched up the front walkway, their faces seemed imbued with a sickening dedication.

A loud cranking rumble sounded. Audrey made her way back to the living room window. The blue van was gone, leaving an empty slot. One of Kirk's minions must be off to greater things. The minions, who parked their vans and used the front of her house as a staging area for sundry handyman jobs, did change faces over time. As each got jailed for one felony or another, a new crop of minions came in.

She approached the white box on the table, virginal looking in its innocence, and opened it once more. "Hell!" the flames hissed in her face. "Here's hell to you, Kirk." She raised the open box high in the air.

What a shame to have to wrap the box, but then she also couldn't wait to send off this bit of mischief she'd concocted. She felt proudly sly.

She didn't expect earthshaking results. The box of hell was mainly a way to vent anger. She wished that receiving this odd artifact might knock unflappable Kirk off balance, put some fear



into him. But if opening the box gave him nothing more than a shaky moment, she'd still be pleased.

Kirk had a loyal ragtag band of disciples, but he also owned his share of enemies. What about the fat cats who parked their BMWs and Lexuses, leaving engines running for as long as it took to duck into his house to swap a wad of bills for a tidy packet? How many had been burned? The guy who'd just gunned his truck down the street was not a satisfied customer. How many former girlfriends nursed grudges, had brothers, boyfriends, fathers, who wanted revenge? A disgruntled ex-minion or two might even be in the lot.

She doubted Kirk would suspect her. They'd had a few skirmishes, all one-sided, Kirk barely taking notice of her even as she complained. "That wasn't my dog you heard," he'd say in his grating, factual voice. "I keep my dog penned up. That wasn't me you heard. I wasn't even here. Those ain't my vans. You'll have to talk to the guys that own 'em." His expression was neutral, at most a mild scowl, the same expression Audrey herself wore when interrupted by phone solicitors. His vacant denials upset her more than his noise. She had no impact; he didn't even know her name.

Then there had been that clash a month ago. While sweeping her walkway, she'd noticed tire tracks worn into her lawn and skid marks on the sidewalk. Kirk had recently begun pulling his new red Jeep up onto his lawn, parking it over the stump of what had once been a pretty mimosa tree. Soon after he moved in, the tree died and had to be cut down (Audrey didn't blame the tree for dying), and now its stump functioned as an oil catcher for the Jeep. She tried not to let the Jeep get to her, but this was too much. Instead of backing out of his own driveway, he was simply tearing across her lawn.

Holding the broom in both hands like a peasant's crude weapon, she had marched to his front door, seized the mold-encrusted knocker, and banged it so hard her fingers vibrated. The door swung open. Kirk stood there wearing his usual unperturbed expression, a can of Dixie beer dangling from the fingers of one hand. Otherwise, he had nothing on but a towel wrapped around his middle, a fact Audrey didn't fully register until she'd finished her accusation and stood, redfaced and trembling, in its aftermath.

"They ain't my tracks," he said in his factual whine, as if merely turning down a Girl Scout selling cookies.

Audrey shook the broom handle in his face. "What do you mean? That's your Jeep on the lawn. The tracks arch from your side to mine. You know damn well those're your tracks."

"Don't know nothing about it."



"And I'm sick of your friends parking their crummy vans in front of my house. If I want a used car lot, I'll put it in myself."

Kirk downed some beer. "You don't own the street."

"You think you own it, the street in front of my house." Seeing the words MODEL MOTEL printed on the towel in black, she blurted, "You steal towels from motels too." An urge to spear his belly button with the broom handle came over her, but before she could act, Kirk freed the towel at his waist with the flick of a thumb. As it dropped, his brows hiked upwards in a blasé look of superiority. With a flourish, he gave the door a shove. Bang! Audrey dropped the broom.

Back in her own house, she plopped on the sofa, gripping the broom across her lap. She let go with one hand, held it palm down, and watched it shake. Powerless rage. How could she put an end to this scourge? She'd already tried the police, mentioned the suspicious visitors. They weren't interested, said there was no probable cause for a search. She could show them the tracks, accuse Kirk of exposing himself, but he would deny it. She pictured two cops snickering at her. Kirk would use his good-old-boy humor to win them over. One might even drop by later for a beer and a tidy packet.

Her thoughts turned to revenge. She could slash his tires, but hers could be slashed too. She could launch a noise campaign in the morning hours when Kirk was still sleeping, but he probably slept like a dead man. No, the plan she carried out would have to be anonymous.

A friend who worked in the college's biology lab said he had access to bags of frozen skunk glands. He would gladly pilfer some and she could simply toss them under Kirk's house. Heat and decomposition would do the rest.

Great idea. Kirk, skunked out of his kingdom. But what if the odor drifted back to her house? Throwing skunk glands under a house was something rowdy fraternity boys would do—beneath her dignity.

But making these boxes wasn't. The night before, watching him through the blinds at four A.M. as he banged on a pirogue with a stick yelling commands at Brown Dog to amuse his friends, she'd been granted a flash of inspiration. Kirk belonged in hell. She pictured him in an old-fashioned kind of hell, one that the most fanatical fire-and-brimstone preacher would approve of. But he wasn't in hell. He was firmly entrenched next door, banging on pirogues and driving her insane. Justice was not being done.

For her idea she needed a box. She found this one wedged between others, like it in her junk closet. A Christmas gift had

come inside the box—another piece of Belleek china from her stepmother. She aimed to please and somehow got the idea Audrey liked Belleek china. Audrey didn't. She thought it boring—all those creams, pale yellows, and shy touches of shamrock green. Expensive but incredibly dull. Audrey accepted graciously, so the tradition continued, and she could expect to receive another fragile item the next Christmas.

As Audrey taped up Kirk's box of hell, she thought it fitting that the white cockle-finished box her drab china came in was being put to such dynamic use. In black ink she printed MR. KIRK SPILLER and his address on the brown paper, taking pains to give each letter a generic look. She batted the box between her hands. Now that her first creation was ready to go, she felt antsy, curious about the outcome.

Two days later came a let down. She hadn't expected huge results, but the very day that, by her estimation, Kirk would have received the box, he played his stereo at top volume for hours, something he didn't often do. Was he being defiant or did he need the noise to calm his nerves? Either way, the music was unbearable.

Powerless over her own environment. The truth of it made her sick. But once she began planning her next box, she felt better, clearer. This one would be more complicated—it should make him think.

In the library, she pulled out art history books and poured over depictions of hell. She settled on one by the fifteenth century Dutch painter, Hieronymus Bosch. This time she sliced down the four corners of the box with an X-Acto knife, flattening the panels so that drawing would be easier. With India ink and colored pencils, she copied Bosch's rubbery naked people. Many of the tools of torture he'd devised for the damned were musical instruments. One sinner was trapped inside a drum; another tied to a giant mandolin, his back painfully stretched over its bridge; a third appeared to be sliding down the trumpetlike shaft of a flute. One unfortunate sinner hung suspended in a harp, arms outstretched, his body pierced through by its strings.

She took care to copy it exactly. The painstaking work absorbed her attention, calmed her. After laboring for a week in her spare time, she taped up the corners to reform the box and looked inside. What she saw was too beautiful to give away. She kept the box several days for her own enjoyment, but mailed it after someone blew a car horn in Kirk's driveway for two hours during the night.

The Bosch box arrived Saturday afternoon. Audrey saw him receive it, for she peered through the blinds of the window that

overlooked his porch, watching on and off until his door finally opened. He stretched as if he'd just gotten up, and stepped to the mailbox that dangled from one nail on the porch's column. He pulled out envelopes. Turning, he saw the box on the step. Audrey could make nothing of his expression. What she found encouraging, though, was the way he stumbled as he stooped to pick it up. His face registered an uncharacteristic momentary surprise at his own clumsiness.

In the next two weeks little changed out front, except that a new van appeared. This one, dirty white, its grill bashed in, had the words BEST AIR painted on the side panels. Audrey especially disliked its owner, who had a stubby nose and wore safari shorts and an Aussie Outback hat. She asked him not to park in front of her house; he gave her the finger. Best Air would pull up on a Monday, enter Kirk's house, and not emerge for a week, except to drive off with Kirk in his red Jeep. Gradually, it dawned on her that Best Air was living there too, with Kirk and the girl named Star.

Best Air was as good as Kirk at tossing beer cans off the porch. The day Audrey struck one with her lawn mower, she began her third box. She tried to imagine how Kirk saw things, and doubted that he'd given much attention to the intricate detail of her Bosch box. He probably hadn't even noticed his own likeness on the face of the man strung through the harp, or Brown Dog, walking on his back legs, masquerading as a devil with pointy ears and tail. Kirk's limited attention span required something simpler—an obvious image that would deliver a sharp punch to the gut.

She colored the next box black and enclosed a piece of white paper, three inches square. In its center she drew a circle the size of a quarter, and colored it black. The Black Spot. Surely Kirk had read at least a comic book version of *Treasure Island* and knew the Black Spot meant death. Even if he didn't remember the blind buccaneer, Pew, and his tapping cane, the significance of the Black Spot seemed obvious. Maybe he'd think the Mafia was after him.

Soon after mailing the Black Spot box, Audrey came home to find that the boat that always straddled the curb in front of Kirk's house was gone. One of the trucks, the Jeep, and Brown Dog had vanished too. For a week, nothing stirred next door. She couldn't believe it. Had the Black Spot scared him? Was he staying with friends, looking for another house to rent, or considering a move back to the wilds of South Louisiana where he came from?

But the next Sunday morning he returned; the boat reclaimed its spot. Best Air was back too, along with some other bare-chested friends. They drank beer, whooped it up, unloaded ice chests filled with fish. Later, a gun went off. On tiptoe, Audrey peered through

the blinds in her bedroom and saw Kirk aiming a rifle down an alley behind the dog pen.

"You can't shoot worth a shit!" yelled Best Air.

Kirk fired again.

"That rat's ass is in the next state by now."

"Freakin' rat," Kirk bellowed.

Audrey began work on her next box. She turned it into a peep show like ones she made in grammar school. She cut a square in the lid for a skylight and covered the opening with pink cellophane. Then she cut a hole at one end for viewing. She decorated the inside with instruments of torture like the ones used during the Spanish Inquisition. Instead of drawing directly on the box, she made cut outs and glued them on. Manacles hung from the walls, and a cut out man with hair the color of Kirk's was chained to a pair of them in the center panel. A shrouded figure stood to one side, its bony hand on a lever operating a rack. Pokers and eye gouges littered the floor. Battle-axes crossed on one wall, and a coffin-shaped box leaned against another. Audrey had seen one of those in a Vincent Price movie. When the door shut on the victim, he was impaled on spikes sticking out of the back.

The torture chamber peep show took longer to complete than her Bosch box. When she squinted through the small hole, she could swear that the figures inside were moving around. The pinkish light filtering through the cellophane gave the scene a horrifying glow.

A month of calm followed Kirk's receipt of the torture chamber. Best Air seemed to have disappeared along with his van. The faded blue and rusted white van weren't coming as often as they used to. A spot had been freed up in front of her house, a little window on the world. Audrey didn't feel as walled in. She slept better. Brown Dog stayed in his pen at night. Doris, the lady on the other side of Kirk, said it was because of the complaints she'd made to Animal Control, but Audrey liked to think her torture chamber had something to do with the change.

She was down to her last Belleek box. It sat on the dining table, but making another seemed unnecessary now.

At work one day in late August, the friend who had offered the skunk glands showed up at her desk, curious about how things were going next door. No more late-night parties, Audrey was pleased to report. Life was bearable at last. She missed making the boxes, but for the first time in a year, she was beginning to enjoy living in her house.

But that very night, Audrey's peace was shattered. She sat upright in bed, startled awake by a girl's insistent voice. "Not fair, Kirk! Not fair, not fair."

Audrey groaned. Her bedside clock blinked 3:14.

"Open up, Kirk! That's not fair!"

Audrey threw her pillow at the wall. She could hear the girl on Kirk's front porch, pounding the knocker. Not fair. No, not fair to be awakened in the middle of the night. She could shoot that stupid girl, and Kirk too.

She slipped on a robe and paced her front room. The knocking continued. "That's enough," Audrey said aloud. She opened the front door and stuck her head out.

Star stood beneath the porch light. Her hair, usually styled in feathery layers framing her heart-shaped face, was wet and matted to her head. Wearing pink shorts and a white halter top, she appeared even smaller than Audrey remembered—childlike, though not in the sense of a robust, present-day child. Audrey thought of orphans in Dickens's time, pictures in history books of children who worked in mills during the Industrial Revolution, slight of build, with faces that seemed to belong to weary, defeated adults rather than to children.

"Kirk!" Star shouted. "Open up. Please. Let me in. It's raining!"

Audrey noticed the straight sheets of rain. She took a step outside under the protection of her porch roof, then another. She reached the end of the porch and gripped the railing. She was close to Star now, barely fifteen feet away, heart fluttering as the girl pounded on the door. "Give me my keys, Kirk. At least give me my keys."

Audrey gripped the railing and rehearsed the words she intended to say. *Please have some consideration! Some people work and have to get up in the morning.* Her heart beat wildly as she debated calling these words out. Standing there behind the railing, it seemed she was watching a little play unfold that was beyond her reach, magical and tragic. Hers was a front row seat, and though so close to the action, she watched from the unbridgeable distance that separates an audience from the stage. Star was so focused on calling Kirk she didn't notice Audrey. She pressed her head to the door and beat her palm against the wood. "I have nowhere to go," she said. "At least let me get my things, my keys, Kirk. I didn't do anything wrong." Her thin shoulders shook under the loose straps of her halter top. She began to cry.

The door flew open so abruptly, Star nearly fell across the threshold. Audrey couldn't see Kirk, but she heard his scratchy voice: "Still asking for it, huh." His arm jutted into the light and a

large hand grabbed the girl's wrist; she let out a squeak as he yanked her inside. The door slammed.

Audrey stepped back into the quiet of her living room. Kirk's voice echoed in her ears. She thought of Star going back inside, how little respect she must have for herself. Hopelessly sad.

She slumped in a chair at her dining table. The last Belleek box sat amongst the crayons as if waiting for the next design. How foolish, to think these would have any effect. But what effect had she intended? To shake him up, get even? Lately, hadn't she hoped for something else? A change in his character? How silly.

A new idea flashed: Maybe her boxes were working, but in a way she hadn't anticipated. They were bringing out the worst in him. Kirk was becoming his own worst self, teetering on the edge of being the devil himself.

Audrey's eyes narrowed as she looked at the living room wall that paralleled his house. She clamped her lips tight and folded her arms. *Good*. Kirk would go down, down. He deserved to have something horrible happen, and it would. Surely. But first, she would send one last box, one that would haunt him like the Eye of God, the Eye of Truth. He was too craven to look inward, see his true state. If he could, he'd be so filled with horror, maybe he would pick up one of his guns and blow out his brains. He would be doing the entire world a marvelous favor. She would send him this last box, a harbinger of his final destruction.

She lifted the box and, gazing into its creamy insides, envisioned the image it was destined to hold. The design came to her complete. It would be a magnificent final statement.

She slid the X-Acto knife down the corners and pressed the panels flat. She selected two crayons, white and sky blue, and went to work. No need to plan. Her hand seemed guided by another, one that could not make a mistake. Soon she was retaping the corners. She slipped the lid on top and opened it to experience the full effect.

Instead of sulphur and brimstone, the box emitted a heavenly mist. The walls and bottom showed puffy white clouds floating across a blue background. Centered on the bottom panel was a life-sized eye. Audrey used her own right eye as the model, viewing it closely in a mirror. She colored the pupil midnight blue and gave the iris a translucent wash of violet. The finished eye, staring out from a sky of perfect clouds, looked real enough to blink. Audrey smiled with superior knowledge. The Eye of Truth saw All—the Eye of God, unblinking.

The next morning, she stood in line at the post office. The box felt so light in her hands, she imagined that, if released, it would float in the air. "Thing fooled me," the clerk said, placing it on the

scale. "Light as a feather." He winked. "You sending somebody a feather?"

"Belleek china," she answered. "A small piece."

"Then I'll treat this baby like a thin-shelled egg." Tenderly, he stamped the brown paper, printing the word FRAGILE in red letters. To Audrey's delight, he repeated the action on each side. "Just a tip," he said. "Bubble wrap—like shipping it in a cloud."

Audrey smiled serenely, a vision of her own clouds filling her head.

The box arrived the next day, Saturday, at ten thirty A.M. Audrey was alerted when she heard the familiar squeak of her own mailbox out front. She ran to the side window and peeked through the blinds just in time to see the postman set the brown package to the right of Kirk's door.

She considered dialing his number, waking him to get his day going. Best not hurry Providence. She gave the box a last glance through the blinds. A delicious feeling filled her. Something was going to happen. She'd worried that the box would be smushed, or that his girlfriend would open it. But now a certainty came to her that Kirk would open it himself, the way he was meant to. What the box held, intended only for him, would make him sweat.

At two, Audrey left to run an errand. Driving past Kirk's, she saw that the package was still there. The red Jeep parked over the mimosa stump confirmed that he was home. She was pleased that Star's pointy yellow sports car was nowhere in sight. Perhaps she'd left him, left for good.

When Audrey returned half an hour later, the box was gone. Otherwise, things out front looked the same. Red Jeep on lawn, totaled brown truck run aground in driveway, boat and two vans lining the street out front, and a leaning tower of trash between the Cadillac and Olds.

Audrey pulled into her driveway. Killing the motor, she experienced a moment's ecstasy. He was opening the box right now—opening it alone, as he should. She imagined the eye's searing gaze burning a hole through his rotten soul.

That night she slept soundly. No good old boys hooting, no yells of "Brown Dog," no hysterical girlfriends. She slept late and lay in bed after waking, listening to the birds. When she rose to get the paper, though, she found a familiar van sitting in her gutter, touching bumpers with the blue truck Kirk's minions picked up each weekday, leaving their orange bomb of a Buick in its place. In the past, Audrey sometimes debated which she detested most: the Best Air van or the blue truck with its trellis structure that supported lengths of lumber, rebar, and PVC piping.



Today, Audrey didn't debate. She hadn't expected drastic changes overnight. Still, she sensed change in the air, even though when she stuck her head outside, she saw Brown Dog roaming. He peed on the van, then loped back to a plastic trash bag on Kirk's lawn that he'd already ripped open. Hunkering down, Brown Dog pulled out its contents like a child emptying a Christmas stocking. Wads of paper soon surrounded him and began wafting onto Audrey's property.

She shrugged and shut the door. Maybe the wind would pick up and tumbleweed the trash on down the block. She dressed in shorts and a tank top, poured a cup of coffee, and sat at the kitchen table reading the paper. Brown Dog and the trash and the dented van and rusty blue truck aside, something was due to happen soon. She knew.

A horn tooted. Audrey investigated. Star's yellow sports car hummed in the street.

A bitter reflux of coffee invaded Audrey's throat; her arms, shoulders, and face glistened with clammy apprehension. Her breaths condensed on the white miniblinds, fogged back on her mouth and nose.

Kirk appeared. In tan jeans and a soft suede shirt, he sauntered down the front walkway, stepping over mounds of trash as though they were so many garlands laid at his feet. Brown Dog sat on his haunches, tongue curling up—a cheerful sentinel, wishing his master good day. Kirk slapped the car's hood and hopped in on the passenger side.

Early for him to be up, Audrey thought, as the car peeled off. Maybe they were off to a kiss-and-make-up hamburger. She squeezed a smile onto her face. An infinitesimal trembling rippled through her body as if some weird tachycardia had commenced firing at the cellular level. She wished she could have seen Kirk's face to gauge whether his expression had changed at all. His macho, swaggering walk certainly seemed no different.

More paper was accumulating on her lawn. She hadn't the heart to go out there and pick it up.

Star was back with Kirk. Brown Dog would continue to shred garbage bags and bark all night. Cars and trucks and rude, freaked-out druggies would come and go. As before, complaints to the police would be unheeded.

She'd sworn that the Eye of God box would be her last. She had no new ideas. Without a creative outlet to vent her anger, depression flooded in. She crawled into bed, pulled the sheets up to her chin, and lay there, eyes blinking in a kind of non-rhythm with the void. Thinking about nothing was intensely painful. If eternity

were like this, full of thinking about nothing, she'd rather be snuffed out.

The phone rang: Doris, the crabby lady who lived on the other side of Kirk. Audrey listened to her meandering message on the answering machine. "Can you believe all that trash?" Doris's voice was a smokey rasp. "I have half a mind to call the ASPCA on that dog, only I feel sorry for the poor animal. Just thought I'd tell you, I picked up the trash on my side. I'd help with yours, but have to visit my sister in the hospital. She's got gall bladder. Oh, and I talked to that girl he's dating—that Star. Awful, the way he treats her. Awful, what she told me, but she won't take advice. Thinks she can change him. Silly girl. I'm rattling on as usual, my strong suit. Good-bye, Audrey dear. Talk to you later. We need to fix this guy. He's detrimental to the neighborhood. Maybe we can do something."

"Do something." Audrey groaned under the covers. Doris was nuts, thinking anything they might do could get rid of Kirk. Sometimes Doris deposited Brown Dog's feces in front of Kirk's door to let him know she didn't like the dog pooping on her lawn, but even that obvious message didn't make a dent in Kirk. Nothing did. And his cheerful minions would clean up the mess.

Audrey gave up the ghost. Kirk had won. Monday—no need to tell Doris—she would call a real estate agent. She would sell the little house she loved so much, the house that would have been perfect for her if not for Kirk.

Once she finally pried herself out of bed again, Audrey left the house, driving with no destination in mind. She ended up at the mall, wandered past racks of clothes she had no interest in buying. Then she strolled into the movie theater and sat through a movie she had no interest in seeing. Car chases, monster truck pulls, endless jokes about bodily functions. Kirk would have loved it.

Around dusk, she returned to her trash-strewn front yard. She drank a glass of wine with leftovers, went to bed early. If she were lucky, she might win a few hours of sleep before Kirk and Star returned from the bar where he worked. Doris had found out its name: Inca Hoots Bar.

Perfect, she thought blearily, propped up in bed after downing a fourth glass of wine. She nodded off. In her dreams, she was sitting at the bar of Inca Hoots. Kirk served up his good-old-boy smile. "I'd like a gin and tonic," she told him. He puffed out his chest and said, "My specialty." He poured straight whiskey into a tall glass with no ice, elbow cocked out at an affected angle. "On the house." He shoved the glass at her.

She jolted awake. A loud thud woke her, as if a tall bureau had toppled over. Then came a voice—Star's. In the dark, Audrey

squinted at her window. Through it, she could just make out Kirk's bedroom window—a fuzzy yellow light gleaming through a curtain. The voice was muffled; the girl was wheedling, pleading. "Give me my keys, Kirk. I didn't do anything wrong!" The same thing she'd said the last time, when she'd stood on Kirk's front porch that night it rained.

Audrey lay back, blinking at the dark. She recognized Kirk's nasal whine but couldn't decipher his words.

"My keys!" Star's voice was high pitched, frantic. "Give me my keys!"

Kirk's answer was an unintelligible bleat. Star cried, "Stop it! I just want to go home, want to see my mom."

Audrey blinked at the black ceiling, her jaw sunk into her neck. Would this tale of human folly never end? Should she call the police? How many times before had they argued and made up again?

Next came an unexpected sound. A shot. Audrey immediately knew what it was.

All arguing stopped. The total quiet Audrey longed for descended. Eerie—that's what this quiet was. A scary void she wished would fill up with sound again. She crossed her arms on her chest, willing to act the part of a mummy who knows nothing, hears nothing, hopes the shot was a dream.

A minute later, Kirk's front door banged. A soul-wrenching howl axed through the walls of Audrey's modest clapboard house. It was Kirk, now in the role of mourning wolf. Then came the pounding. Fists against metal. "Damn! Dammit! Dammit to God!"

Groggy from the wine she'd drunk earlier, Audrey angled her legs out of bed, stood, nestled into her robe, tugging its loose flaps around her and tying the sash. From the living room windows, she spied Kirk's nude, rubbery body, his radical movements tricked out by the yellow porch light. He was standing in the gutter in front of his house, beating his fists against the derelict Cadillac.

"Nuts!" Kirk yelled. "Stupid bitch. Nuts!"

Audrey let go of the blinds. She clasped her hands and held them up to her chin in a devout, if merely secular, prayer on Star's behalf. Kirk was the one who'd emerged from the house, not Star. Did that mean she was still in the bedroom? Audrey pictured her sprawled on a grimy carpet, her blood leaking into cheap dirty fibers.

She should contact the police, but even as the thought occurred, a siren blared. Doris, on the other side of Kirk's house, must have called them, her finger always so quick on the trigger, ready to summon a higher authority.

Audrey opened the front door. It seemed that the last act of the

play she'd witnessed days earlier was unfolding. Two policemen approached Kirk. He gave the Caddy one last pop with his bloody fists, then ran back to his porch with an odd, penguinlike stride. There, like Stanley Kowalski, only without a T-shirt to rip, he dropped to his knees in front of the policemen and bellowed, "Star! Star!"

Audrey hoped an ambulance would pull up next. Instead, a more sedate vehicle, the color of putty, with tall, narrow double doors in back, crawled up the street. It hugged the curb and, like a molting crab, nestled into the only empty spot in front of Audrey's house.

The phone rang. Audrey wasn't up to it. The answering machine did its job. "She's dead!" Doris sang, a soprano vibrato. "Star is dead, poor dear. That's the coroner's van out there. Oh, but Kirk's goose is cooked now. He's history. They slapped the handcuffs on. Kirk is history!"

So is Star, Audrey thought, as she crawled back into bed. She lay there thinking of the girl who couldn't be much more than twenty, the one with the doomed, hopeful expression so much like the one she, herself, had bestowed on Bret many years ago. Cocooned in blankets, Audrey fell asleep.

Next morning, Monday—Labor Day holiday—she glanced out the kitchen window and saw the same colorful bits of trash that Brown Dog had unbagged the day before. The balled-up paper seemed to perch on her lawn like happy Easter eggs. The day looked too bright for any of last night's drama to have been real. Had she dreamt it all? The gunshot, police cars, coroner's van, Doris's ecstatic call?

Audrey popped two waffles into the toaster.

But no. She hadn't downed so many glasses of wine last night that she'd invented this stuff. It was real. Poor Star. On the other hand, Kirk truly was history, as Doris had joyfully proclaimed.

Audrey had won. Fate had finally smiled upon her. She tried to smile in return. The smile stretched her facial muscles painfully. Undaunted, she said aloud, "No more Kirk," and danced a giddy jig in front of the toaster.

The waffles popped up. She couldn't eat them.

Star. Dead. A girl that age. Star's father died early, Doris had said. Floozy mother. No guidance. The choices had been Star's to make, and now she owned the consequences. Kirk was bad news, sure, but Audrey never imagined he'd kill anyone, least of all pretty, young Star.

The debris from two days ago still fluttered in Audrey's front yard. The sooner she cleaned up all the paper Brown Dog had

ripped out of Kirk's garbage bags, the sooner she would lay this nightmare to rest. She would not think about Star. Not today. Instead, she would clean up her little bit of the world. That was all anyone could hope to do. Audrey returned to the kitchen and, ignoring her shaking hands, hunted up a bag and work gloves. Out front, she cruised the lawn, stashing trash in the sack.

When she finished on her side, she continued onto Kirk's property. Brown Dog growled. Had no one made provision for him? "Dumb dog," Audrey said. He bounded up and slobbered on her gloved hand. "That's a good, dumb dog." She patted his broad, boney head. Whatever happened next, bad dreams aside, she felt happy that Kirk's empire of weeds and pirogues, junk cars, boats, and beer bottles had now fallen.

She shoved a last wad of paper into the sack and crinkled its top edges together. She would discard Kirk's trash in her own tough garbage can, the lid of which snapped on so tight not even Brown Dog could knock it off.

She glared at Kirk's porch. Three air conditioners were stacked on the side nearest her house, next to an ice chest. Newspapers littered the area in front of the door, along with a single flip-flop and a chewed, leather dog collar. Chained to the column at the other end stood a spanking new orange-topped gas barbecue on a cart. It had been there for at least a month, not even used once.

Everything Kirk owned, except for his clothes, the red Jeep, and gas barbecue, was a mess; and the Jeep and barbecue would quickly dilapidate also. Every new thing he acquired soon looked as if it had been left out in the weather for decades. The same was true of his girlfriends. Yet he always walked out his front door as if he'd just stepped out of a bandbox.

Did I really hope to battle such a mentality with crayons and paints? Audrey asked. He'd thought nothing of plowing up her lawn, trashing her peace and quiet, erecting walls of pure junk. Now he'd shot Star, a girl who had her whole life ahead of her.

An embolism of hatred fired in Audrey's brain. Next thing she knew, she was standing on Kirk's porch.

The red and white ice chest went first. Like Moses with his tablets, she heaved it over her head onto the lawn. The lid went flying, and Brown Dog chased it down, loving the sport. The air conditioners were next. She pushed with all her strength and sent the top two crashing into the azaleas.

She kicked the newspapers and rusted gardening tools, the dog collar, and lone flip-flop before her as she made her way to the barbecue. With one mighty shove, it keeled over into the azaleas on the other side of the steps. As it crashed, the chain that secured

it to the porch's rotting wooden column yanked the support off its pedestal. The overhang slumped, creaked. Old nails whined against wood, threatened collapse.

Audrey jumped down the three steps to the walkway, exhilarated by a desire to be caught. Brown Dog, tired of the ice chest lid, watched with faint surprise as she picked up the sack of trash and headed toward the sidewalk where a candy wrapper fluttered. Audrey stopped.

Doris approached. "I don't blame you for that one bit," she said, taking in Audrey's destruction. "But did you hear? Kirk's now claiming she committed suicide."

"Suicide?"

"He says Star pulled the trigger on herself, the rat. I don't believe it. Do you?"

"No," Audrey said. "Star asked for her keys. She wanted to go to her mother's."

"I hope you tell the police. If you don't, Kirk will get off. And they said—they interviewed me already because I'm the one called soon as it happened—they said Kirk blamed Star for sending some kind of boxes. Don't know what that's about. He kept accusing her of sending these boxes, something she'd made, and she wouldn't admit it. He was furious. Star was into arts and crafts, you know."

"Boxes." Audrey repeated the word as if reading it out of a dictionary, but her free hand flew to her neck just beneath the jaw, and the fluttery tips of her fingers registered the wild throbbing of her pulse there.

"Don't know what they were. Just some awful boxes." Doris hiked her shoulders, waved her hands willy-nilly. "The police say Star must have made these boxes that set him off." Doris eyed Kirk's porch with disdain. "That boy was downright mean when he drank. But we're rid of him. His landlady will want him out, even if he gets off. How Jackie could rent to the likes of him I do not know. She grew up in that house! The police say he had forty automatic guns on a table in his living room! Laid out like sardines, one next to the other, to intimidate the guys who came to buy drugs. They've got him on arms violations. They found heroin. We're rid of him. Can't believe it, can you?"

Doris tilted her head. "Don't take it too hard, dear. The police will probably want to talk to you today, but rest easy now. A few weeks, this mess will be a dim memory. Bless the Lord." Doris gave a bright wave and retreated to her own property. She shook her head one last time, as if in memory of Star, and disappeared inside her house.

Audrey stared at Kirk's cleared front porch, then turned, head-

ing toward the sidewalk. The sack in her hand, full of Kirk's trash, felt heavy. Just ahead, on the muddy ruts between the Cadillac and boat trailer in Kirk's gutter, sat a large cardboard box stacked high with old magazines. Perched on top of the stack was the white Belleek china box—her last creation. Kirk must have put it out for trash yesterday, hours before his fight with Star. An orange peel sprawled across its lid. "My aesthetic solution," Audrey muttered, ready to salvage her masterpiece.

She dropped the sack and stood a moment, contemplating the orange peel. It had been pared in one perfect spiral. That didn't seem like something Kirk would do.

Flushed, chest heaving, her mouth dropped open as she held one end of the corkscrew peel between the thumb and index finger of her gloved hand. She watched it *boing* up and down in the air. Coming back to herself, she flung it aside and lifted the white box from atop an *Outdoor* magazine. She held it at waist level, ready to mangle the thing with her bare hands as viciously as Kirk crumpled his beer cans.

But first, one last time, she pulled the lid off. The eye, her own, yet strangely foreign, stared out with the chilling force of expressionless vision. The stare sliced through her as if its ultimate mark were waiting in deep space. Audrey half expected to be given cosmic directions to a place where she would grasp the ungrasped. But the eye only stared out from its nest of clouds, uninvolved, its focus unwavering. Her hands—pressed against the sides of the nearly weightless box—seemed in possession of nothing.

Head bowed, she stood holding her creation for some time—much too long for any human being to keep still without making a noise, it must have seemed to Brown Dog. He pushed his moist snout against the back of her leg. Even then, Audrey stood motionless for some minutes longer, a stunned expression on her face. 🐕

## HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.



# RUSSELL DAVENPORT AND THE BREAK-IN ARTISTS

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ALEX AUSWAKS

**I**f you drive into St. Albans from London, you have to leave the A1 to join the A6, which soon thereafter begins to climb slowly. At the top of the hill, St. Albans lies spread out before you, and at night its lights wink merrily at you, teasing you not to stop at the hospitable pub standing right on top of the hill. In any case, in the wee hours of the morning, the pub is shut, and if it is a cold night, the lights of St. Albans are all the more inviting. Unless you know that St. Albans, like the pub atop the hill, also lies fast asleep.

On a night and at an hour when no traffic moved along the A6, a lone cyclist walked his bicycle to the top of the hill. He paused, not to admire the view, but to catch his breath, and having done so, mounted his vehicle, put his chin down to his chest, and effortlessly sailed down the hill.

There was no moon. It was pitch dark except for the lights in the far distance below.

A van, which had parked halfway down the side of the hill along the shoulder, now pulled out silently, showing no lights. It began to coast down the hill very slowly. The cyclist was nearly behind it when the driver of the van jammed on his brakes. The cyclist barely had a moment of awareness, barely a moment to curse the driver of the van for not having brake lights, when he crashed at full speed into the back of the van. The back of the van was protected by a thick plastic sheet, now plastered with the poor cyclist's flesh and blood. A figure opened the back door of the van, rolled up the plastic sheet, thrust it into a bag, whipped the coverings off the brake lights, jumped into the back



Hank Blaustein 2006

of the van, shut the doors behind him, and the van sped away.

About an hour later, a couple on their way home from a party came across the grisly remains.

The assumption made by the police was that the cyclist had been accidentally knocked down and run over, and that the car or lorry must bear some of the telltale remains of the dead man. They launched a search for such a vehicle, but the search came to nothing. What little information was available was documented and filed away. The police are great believers in Providence.

"There's a very sexy piece eyeing you," said Peter Strevens of the C.I.D. "And she doesn't know that I know who she is," he added as an afterthought.

He and Russell Davenport, the freelance insurance investigator who hated being known as an occasional private detective, were doing the pubs one evening from one end of Fishpool Street to the other.

"Do tell me," said Russell Davenport.

"If you go to the bar for the next round, I bet you get picked up," said Peter Strevens.

"It's your turn, then," said Russell to his policeman friend.

"I'll give my turn a miss," was the nonchalant reply. "Go on, then. Don't keep the lady waiting."

Russell picked up the empties and, as he walked to the bar, stole a glance at her. She was certainly a very sexy piece. Flashy. Dyed black hair. Ample bosom. Bright red skirt. Low-cut, brightly designed blouse. Cheap imitation fur. Platform shoes. One couldn't miss her easily. She clutched a black handbag and, with one foot on the bar step and the other on the floor, was poised for a quick move. As Russell turned from the bar, holding two glasses, she moved quickly and deliberately, so as to spill one of his drinks. She apologized profusely, wiped his coat, ordered and paid for a replacement, and carried it to his table, having politely suggested he go back to his seat to give the coat a chance to dry. There was nothing else to do but invite her to join them.

At this point what self-restraint she had gathered went, and she became nervous and edgy. She tried to talk "proper" and didn't quite manage it. The three made desultory conversation. When the two men rose to go, she got up and determinedly followed them.

"I won't play gooseberry," Peter Strevens muttered under his breath.

"Who is she?" mouthed Russell.

At this point Peter began to utter extravagant good-byes and left them at the door outside the pub.

She looked embarrassed and flustered and began to paw at his sleeve. "The one at the bottom of the street serves dinners. I'm a career girl, I am. Let me take you to dinner."

Russell was half amused, half irritated, but he went along with her.

She wasn't exactly at ease being waited upon, but Russell thought she looked as if she could get used to and enjoy it. "She's got character," Russell thought to himself. "Wonder who destroyed her self-confidence?" But aloud he said, "Tell me what's it all about. You don't look like a girl who has to pick men up and take them to dinner. It should be the other way round."

She looked at him gratefully, then bit her lip. "It's about Tommy," she said, her voice low.

"And who is Tommy?"

"Tommy is . . ." she hesitated. "Tommy . . . Tommy was, we was living together, see. And then 'e got hisself killed. 'E was found on the road coming down that 'ill, you know, this side of St. Albans (she pronounced it "Snorbans"). The one where they have the pub on top. I reckon they got 'im, but the police won't believe me. They think it's just another 'it-and-run."

She had begun to speak more naturally than in the pub where they had met, trying less to impress him with an artificial diction that did not suit her. Her voice was pleasant, a contrast to the loud colors she wore. Russell wondered if nobody at school had suggested she sing in the choir, but then switched his mind back to what she was saying. "Who is they, and why should they want to kill him?"

"I dunno. If I did, I'd've told the police, wouldn't I?"

"Why kill him?"

"Cause 'e must've found out something about 'em!" she said vehemently.

"Tell me," he said, "what made you come to me?"

"I asked this lady. I do for them three times a week. There's this old general and his wife and this other lady that all live together. Well, I told this other lady 'cause she's the sort that listens to people. And she said, 'Mr. Russell Davenport is your man.' Bit old fashioned she is, but I thought her advice would be good." She smiled. "She described you and said you and your mate do Fishpool Street regular, and any barman would point you out."

"And you've tried the police?"

"They don't believe me," she said deliberately and slowly, and with mounting anxiety repeated, "They don't believe me."

"It's not my sort of thing," said Russell, but he knew that because



Mrs. Stammers had recommended him he was hooked. He had thought Mrs. Stammers might have got away with it herself and wasn't likely to bring herself to the attention of someone like him, and here she was with the coolness to recommend the insurance investigator who hadn't seen through her if she had . . . hmmm.

Russell smiled as he thought through that. He said, "Okay, tell me all. Slowly."

She opened her handbag and said in a determined way, "I want to pay you in advance. Tommy and I was savin' to put down for a 'ome. 'E didn't have regular employment, so we 'ad to 'ave a large deposit. I was also puttin' aside—well, I wanted a proper wedding, in church and all . . . and . . . well, I can afford to pay you."

She had taken out a pile of crisp-looking notes as she spoke and placed them on the table in front of him. "It was all in my name in the Building Society. In case Tommy got put away."

"Oh, and why should he be put away?"

"Tommy was a burglar. Couldn't read nor write. So all 'e could get was laborin' jobs. 'E was a bit too small, anyway, for laborin' jobs. Made no difference to me, though," she said defensively. "'E needed me 'cause I used to read for 'im. Like there was this book that tells you all the posh 'ouses in the area. I used to read that to 'im and he used to go and burgle 'em. Well, some time ago he came 'ome with like a briefcase, and inside there was a list of 'ouses what were insured, and it said what they 'ad inside. Also dates and ticks. Tommy was never greedy and 'e never took too much. Always went for small things to carry away on a bike. People didn't notice 'im on a bike."

"Didn't the police stop him, ever?"

"Tommy had no record. Look, I'll tell you the truth. I'm havin' a baby. I don't want it to know its father was . . . was . . . a tea leaf." She used the old East End rhyming slang to indicate he was a thief. "I didn't tell the police what Tommy did. They think 'e was just a laborer, see, and if I told 'em more, it would get in all the papers."

"Where was he the night he was killed?"

"I dunno. You see, Tommy knew I didn't like him being a burglar. It's all wrong, muckin' up people's things and stealing what they like best. Like my mum left me a pendant; it's not worth much, but it's all I got from my mum, so if it was stolen, I'd be 'eartbroke. That's why I'm not so sure I want that money what was Tommy's. I'd rather spend it finding out who dun it."

"So exactly what did you tell the police?"

"I said, someone's got 'im 'cause 'e knew too much, and I said 'e did odd jobs and they asked me where, and I told 'em a couple of places, but nobody knew 'im there, and they thought I was prob-

ably supportin' 'im and . . . and . . . Tommy's not one to live off a girl. 'E was real independent."

"You still haven't answered my earlier question. Where was he the night he was killed? What place was he burgling? Haven't you any clue?"

"I dunno. Like I read the list to 'im and 'e'd memorize one or two names and where they was . . . 'e had a terrific memory. We was a bit puzzled, as some of the list was ticked, so Tommy decided 'e'd go for some what was ticked and some what wasn't."

"Have you got the list?"

"No, I can't find it. I looked everywhere for it, but it was gone."

"Was it stolen?"

"No sign. Just gone."

"And the briefcase?" asked Russell.

"I threw it away. I never let Tommy keep anything, just in case, you know."

"Can you remember any names and addresses on the list?"

"No," she said miserably.

"Tell me again, what was on that list," persisted Russell.

"Like, there'd be the name of the person, and then the name of the house, and then the address. Some of the houses had very strange names," she said.

"If I get you a list of the names of houses, could you recall them, the ones on the list?"

"I'd try," she said.

"Can you remember the last names and addresses you read to Tommy before he had the accident?"

"That was no accident," she flared up. "They killed 'im."

"Okay. Can you come round in the morning? I've got various lists of country residences. They might jog your memory."

"Couldn't we drive through the area around Snorbans? If I see the names on the front of the 'ouses, I might remember better that way."

"Okay then, we'll go out for the day tomorrow," he said.

She looked at him gratefully. They finished eating and she insisted on paying, giving him the money to settle the bill. They came out into the fresh evening air.

They walked up the beautiful winding street with overhanging houses. She took him under the arm and pulled him to a stop, "Please, can I come home with you?" she said.

He was speechless.

She looked unattractive against the delicate background of the houses, the artificial streetlights dulling her vivid colors.

"Please. I've never had nobody but Tommy. I'm very lonely. Please. Just this once. I know I'm pregnant. But I've never had

nobody but Tommy. I swear." She stopped and took a deep breath. "I'm scared. I'm really, really scared. Please." She began to caress his lapel, then put her nose against his chest and snuffled.

"Blast, Peter," thought Russell.

The next morning they began to cover all the small lanes and roads between outlying villages; the idea being to jog Mary's memory. Her full name was Elisabeth Mary, but she didn't like Elisabeth being constantly shortened to Liz, while Mary was impossible to shorten any further. So Mary she was.

They looked at every house, noted its name and address, while Mary tried to remember whether she had seen it on the list. By the end of the first day, they had only two names and addresses, but they had a pleasant day in the country. She was good company. Bright as a button. Always some funny remark about the house or the garden around it. They got back at four o'clock and Russell telephoned Peter Strevens.

"Do me a favor," he asked Peter, "I've got two addresses, and you can have this done faster than I can. Can I have the names of the owners and . . . and . . . I am playing a hunch . . . could you check whether they reported burglaries?"

Stevens phoned back at six o'clock. "I've got the names for your addresses. They were both burgled six months apart." He fell silent, waiting for Russell to say something. Russell was silent.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Peter.

"Come over and I'll tell you about it," said Russell. "A grateful client has presented me with a case of Finnish beer."

"I'm patriotic," said Peter. "I'd rather drink lukewarm British muck."

"You'll have to adjust your drinking habits to Continental beer. We're in Europe and we're all one now."

"Finland, hmph. You can't fool me," said Peter. "But I'll even drink your foreign beer if it's a good story you have to tell."

They sat in Russell's tiny lounge, the two men drinking beer and Mary sipping white wine.

Russell had convinced her that Peter Strevens would keep her secret, and because she trusted Russell, she decided she could trust Peter.

Russell told him the whole story.

"We've boobed there," said Peter.

Russell smiled and nodded his head graciously.

"So where do we go from here?" asked Peter. "Especially since I can't tell the powers that be precisely why friend Tommy . . ." His voice trailed off.



"You promised," Russell said for Mary's benefit.

"Just tell me what to do," Peter said cheerfully, "and I'll do just as I'm told." He always spoke cheerfully when he intended to be sarcastic, a habit he had picked up from Russell.

"Here is my theory," said Russell, who loved to theorize.

"Oh, spare me that," Peter said. "I worked it out half an hour ago!"

"D'you mean you already know?" Mary asked.

Peter turned to her. "I bet Russell thinks this is an inside job. Someone in an insurance company with access to policies is in this. No doubt Russell wants me to go to the two you recognized and ask them who they are insured with. And if they are both with the same company, we know that's where our man is."

"Let's go now," Russell said. "You go in and ask. Nice police officer."

The first house was a mock Tudor building, set in small grounds, with flowers bordering the lawn. If there had ever been trees growing on the grounds, someone had removed every trace of them. A burglar alarm hung ostentatiously over the porch. There were lights everywhere.

Peter Strevens went to the front door, rang the bell, identified himself to the owner, and was given the name of the insurance company.

They drove on.

"I forgot to ask you to check whether there is an alarm at the back of the house," said Peter.

"Oh, I did that this afternoon. It's the usual."

"Well, this other 'ouse we're going to," interrupted Mary, "they deserve to be robbed."

"Good heavens, why?" asked Peter Strevens, surprised at her vehemence.

"Real mean, they are. The house is worth . . . well, 'ere they are with this expensive 'ouse and all that lovely stuff in it, and they're too mean for a proper alarm."

"What do you mean?" asked Peter.

"'Cause I wandered round the back and there was a bird's nest in the alarm, so I 'ad a close look, but it wasn't real."

"The bird's nest or the alarm," Russell said sarcastically.

Mary slapped his shoulder. "Clever clogs, clever clogs, talks to us as if we be silly hogs."

"Why didn't you say anything?" asked Russell.

"I thought you'd seen it," said Mary. "You always look as if you see everything. I didn't mean that nastily," she added hastily.

"Well, the private sector isn't doing any better than the public sector these days," Peter said as cheerfully as he could.



The next place that Mary had remembered, the one with the bird's nest in the alarm, was owned by a choleric-looking individual of about sixty. He was tall, gaunt, and garrulous. And company was just what he wanted. Discovering that Russell Davenport was an insurance investigator, he launched into a tirade about how the insurance company he was with hadn't reimbursed him in full on the specious grounds that he was underinsured.

Gentle but constant probing by the two men elicited more interesting information because it was tantamount to a confession. Though the man blustered. He had had no burglar alarms previously, and then a man had called selling fake burglar alarms that looked like the real thing, they even carried the name of a well-known firm he had seen advertising. They were cheap and the idea was, the salesman explained, you hung them all round the place and burglars thought the place was properly wired up. The salesman even carried a portable ladder that stretched and stretched up and up and could be used to hang extra alarms over any window. For no extra charge. The chappie wouldn't take a check, but offered to come back next day for cash, as he was a trusting sort of chap. After the burglary, of course, the owner had installed a proper system, but left the fake alarms in their place.

The three went back to the house they had been to first. The alarms in the front of the house were genuine. But at the back they were fake, all right. The embarrassed owner claimed that after he had installed a proper alarm system, a man had called and offered him the fakes. The owner had bought two to "decorate" the back, so to speak. But there was no doubt he was lying.

Both house owners were insured with the same company.

Long after midnight, the three sat in Russell's lounge. Russell was impatient for the morning and the time when people he knew were at their desks to answer the telephone.

"If we ask Mrs. Stammers to put in a proposal for household insurance, with a bit of luck, the salesman of the fake alarms will turn up. He may or may not talk. There is still the inside man in the company." All this from Russell. "I know . . . we have to get at their personnel files and find out who lives hereabouts. The brains of the outfit must be here. Tommy must have got his papers."

"How did they know it was Tommy?" asked Mary.

"Either because he took something that he disposed of through a fence," said Peter, "and they tracked it back to him. Or they had a duplicate list and they staked out the houses. When Tommy appeared, they followed him and . . . These boys are professionals."

There was silence.

As Peter was leaving he said, "If they knew Tommy couldn't read nor write, they'd be after you too, Mary. I think they stole the list while you were at work. They figured, perhaps, if they killed you, we really would start getting suspicious." He paused for thought. "They really are clever. First, they have a fellow going around selling fake alarms, and every time he sells any, the gang moves in, knowing nobody is going to own up to having been mean and cheated. And if they have an inside man in the insurance company tipping them off with the names of new clients, they send their man with the long ladder to hang a few fake alarms. I have a feeling it's a top man inside."

"You both seem to think that," said Mary, "just because Tommy did 'is' ouse. What if it's someone like a secretary or just a clerk?"

"No," said Peter. "I think it's someone higher up. The whole setup shows good organization. For instance, I bet they have a system by which not more than one house at a time gets done in an area. I wonder if it's the man who approves new business?"

"Got it!" said Russell. "It's the man who approves the claims. His job is also to spot patterns in the burglaries. For example, whether they recur in a certain area. In case the thieves ever slip up, he covers for them."

Mrs. Stammers put in a proposal for insurance using the Thundackary-Harding name and address. Sure enough, an engaging man in his thirties called to sell a "fun alarm to deter break-in artists," as he called them. He was picked up, and simultaneously the executive in charge of approving burglary claims was arrested. The two denied knowing each other, but the executive lived in the Hertfordshire countryside in a beautiful house, which he could not possibly afford on his salary. There was a pit at the back of the house for burning rubbish, and in it a zealous constable found the ash remains of a bag, a plastic sheet, and a few burnt last remnants of Tommy. Inside the house there was a list of addresses and dates. It had been stolen from Tommy and had his and Mary's prints still on it. One house was due for treatment that very night, and that was how the gang was picked up.

There was only one thing left to look after, the "moral issue," as Peter Strevens used to tease Russell Davenport. He rang him up and said, "Can you get that devious mind of yours on it, old sport?"

"Ah yes, Peter," said Russell with mock self-satisfaction. "I didn't tell you because I assumed that you knew. I've spoken to the chairman of the insurance company, who is working on a press

statement even now. It should be in the papers tomorrow. As you and I know, ahem, the insurance company was aware all the time that something was up. So, on my recommendation, they employed Tommy. Alas, the villains killed him because he was close on their tracks. But he had left enough information for the police to get onto it and close the case. The insurance company, incidentally, in hiring him, also insured him against death by accident or whatever, and are paying the money to his lawful widow. They are also paying her the reward they secretly offered, and this amount is being put aside in trust for the child."

"Eton, of course," said Peter, without a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"I do believe it is a good school. But do let me go on. The company, as you will see from its press statement, is most mindful of its responsibilities to its policyholders and the public at large, all of whom can rest assured that the company's vigilance has never been, is not, and will not ever be impaired one iota. After all, it was they who called in the police, as you may remember," Russell said cheerfully.

"That is an expensive bit of whitewash," said Peter.

"Worth every penny. The chairman realized that if anyone dropped a hint to the press that it all started with a couple of fellows being picked up in a pub . . ."

"Hey, I didn't get picked up," said Peter. "I have a jealous wife."

"Well, I am sure the public will be relieved to know that a major insurance company was on top of it all," said Russell.

"And Tommy a reformed burglar," said Peter.

"Come, come, Peter. Tommy never was a burglar. The chairman of a major insurance company is prepared to swear on a stack of statistics, or whatever they swear by, that friend Tommy was a skilled private investigator. Come to think of it, I think I wrote the reference for him when he applied."

"I'm surprised," said Peter, "really surprised that you didn't ask for an OBE for him."

"Never thought of it," Russell said. "Now that would have been something for the offspring to show off at . . . what was that school you mentioned? Ah, well, perhaps it'll be a girl. Girls don't care about baubles. Never mind, old son, why don't you come over and help finish the rest of the Finnish beer. Boom! Boom!" As an old East Ender, Russell always accompanied bad puns with "Boom! Boom!"

They were lying on the sofa and floor respectively, boyishly tipping beer out of the cans into their mouths, when a taxi discharged Mary at the door with parcels of baby clothes. ♀

# THE COTTONWOODS

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DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

**H**e came on the stand of cottonwoods in late afternoon. The day was still punishingly hot, and he and the claybank mare were alike grateful for the shade and water. Cottonwoods were known for liking their feet wet, so to speak, growing along streambeds. It was early June, and the seedpods had ripened and burst. The earth was feathered with them, soft as air, like snowflakes dusting the ground, too light to settle and melt, the windblown seedlings looking for an opportunity to root.

Moving under the trees, the claybank shied, catching the scent first, and Placido Geist dismounted, knowing the mare had her own queer horse reasons. It was windless and still, but the smell of death was unmistakable, ripe as the seedpods of the cottonwoods. He tied the reins off to a branch and walked down toward the creek bed, gun in hand, cautious of surprise. He was all too aware of what he was likely to find.

He was somewhat startled, just the same. He'd expected a victim, animal or human, a dead deer, a man shot accidentally or by design. Not this.

The hanged man had been there a good two days. His skin was discolored, dark as an eggplant, his flesh swollen, the rope sunk to the spine, his jawline yeasty and putrefied.

Placido Geist cut him down. The old bounty hunter had seen more than his share of dead men, had put more than his share in the ground, had in fact once left a man just like this, bait for ravens and wasps, a host to maggots. It was an uneasy memory.

He was something off his graze, this being East Texas, not West. The town he rode into at dusk was called Dime Box.

It was small and dusty, the main street unmetaled. There were a couple of automobiles parked by the livery, though, when he went to board his horse, and from the lines strung along poles overhead, there appeared to be a local telephone exchange.

He asked directions to the sheriff's office.

The deputy on duty seemed to Placido Geist amiable but dull witted. Not a man to confide his misgivings in. After some desultory conversation, it was discovered the sheriff might himself be found at supper, across the street.

It was styled a delicatessen. An immigrant family, German Jewish, perhaps thought more at home in New York or Chicago, had put down their stake in this hinterland and were enjoying considerable success, from the evidence of a full dining area, a busy kitchen, and boisterous custom. Placido Geist had second thoughts about disturbing the sheriff in these comfortable surroundings, but the man waved him to a seat opposite. Placido Geist ordered sauerbraten and retailed his errand.

"Two, maybe three days dead, you say?" the sheriff asked.

"I'd calculate," Placido Geist said.

"You buried him." A statement, not a question.

"I wasn't inclined to ride sidesaddle with a cadaver so far advanced," Placido Geist said.

"Point taken," the sheriff said. He was a man not much ahead of middle age, although twenty years younger than the old bounty hunter. He seemed comfortable in his position, not someone to get overinflamed. His name was Duquesne, which he pronounced carefully, doo-KANE. The lawman obviously attached

**I**t was windless and still, but the **smell of death was unmistakable.** some importance, and a history of irritation, to people not getting it right. "I've heard of you," he went on. "Probably most people have, this neck of the woods. By all accounts, you're not someone to be shaken off. What's your sense of this, the man in the cottonwoods?"

"Horse thief, a rustler. I couldn't speak to specifics."

"No identification, I'm assuming."

Placido Geist took a small oilskin packet out of his vest.

"His pockets were empty," he said. "But if they meant him to go to his grave unremarked, they overlooked this."

Duquesne looked at the packet as if it were a tarantula.

"Found it in his boot," Placido Geist said. "It's a letter he asks be sent to his mother, back in Montrose, Michigan, should he be found in circumstances similar to those I found him in. Name of Beauchamp, it's spelled. BEECH-um, I'd imagine."

The sheriff didn't acknowledge this touch of ridicule. He regarded Placido Geist with hooded eyes. "I'd have to look into it," he said.

"Can't ask for better than that," Placido Geist said, and applied

himself to dinner. The sauerbraten was excellent, sweet and pungent, just sour enough, the meat fork-tender.

The sheriff excused himself, his meal not yet finished.

**T**he hotel was somewhat mean, disheveled if not disreputable. The room was cramped, and the single window faced an alleyway, letting in little light. The bedstead was creaky and the mattress lumpy—the linens threadbare, although clean enough. He went down the hall to draw a bath, and found the hot water to be unreliable. He went without.

Resigned to spending the night dirty, he decided to turn in early. It wasn't half past eight, but he was feeling his time in the saddle. The old bounty hunter was in his sixties. There were days now that seemed longer than others.

He struggled to get his boots off, folded his outergarments carefully, and hung them over the back of a chair.

There was a knock on his door. A little tentative.

Placido Geist called out some excuse while he pulled his pants on again. And took the time to snap open the loading gate of the .45 single action with the three-inch barrel and rotate the cylinder. He tucked the gun in his belt at the small of his back, the butt to the right, so-called Mexican carry.

He opened the door.

The girl looked not above nineteen. Nor was she in any way disheveled, but she was definitely disreputable. Her makeup was too liberally applied for daylight, and her manner of dress showed a good deal more skin than appropriate for a librarian or a maiden schoolmarm.

"No offense, ma'am," he said to her, "but I've no use for a whore this evening."

"Edgar Beauchamp," she said. "Known generally as Tip."

Aah, he thought, inviting her in. He didn't think this was a badger game.

Her name was Willie, she told him, and Tip Beauchamp had been swaining her. Not that she imagined he'd take her out of the life, that was an abandoned hope, but he'd treated her with some respect, in itself unusual. She wasn't allowed to pick and choose her custom. She took what came, much of it rough trade.

Placido Geist heard the lineaments of a narrative here, if you could read between the lines.

"Who else?" he asked her. "Or, who else in particular?"

A man named Hagerty, she told him. Derek Hagerty, younger son of Farragut Hagerty, the rancher, and the largest landholder in



the area. She was surprised Placido Geist hadn't heard of him. Placido Geist wasn't surprised. Not that he'd not heard of Farragut Hagerty, but that it was such a common story, that a figure of local importance considered himself above the law.

**"M**urder doesn't go unpunished," Placido Geist said.

"There's no evidence."

"There's what the girl says."

"The word of a trollop."

"I'd take the word of a trollop over that of many a state senator," the bounty hunter told the sheriff. "Most whores give an honest accounting, in my experience."

"I can't go up against Ratgut Hagerty, not and keep my job. The people in this town vote his proxy."

"You'd countenance a killing his son almost certainly had a part in? Let it come to trial, at least."

"On the testimony of a whore." The sheriff looked away.

"Everybody knows the story. You know the story. Farragut Hagerty's boy wanted the girl to himself, and this young man Beauchamp got in the way. They had words over it. Words led to blows. Beauchamp got the best of Derek Hagerty in a fair fight and laid him out on a saloon floor. I've asked around, and I'm a stranger. You don't even have to ask. You know full well that Beauchamp kid got strung up in the cottonwoods for crossing Farragut's clan."

"All right. Maybe it was a couple of Farragut's hands who got overly enthusiastic."

"Who will rid me of this tempestuous priest?"

Duquesne looked at Placido Geist blankly.

"Farragut Hagerty or his son is responsible for this. If a couple of their cowpokes took matters into their own hands, they have to answer for it. And so do the Hagertys."

"I won't go after father or son. I have to live here."

"I don't," Placido Geist said. "I answer to my conscience, not to expediency."

The sheriff took a long breath and let it out, keeping his temper. "I don't much like being told I'm a coward," he said.

"I don't give a damn what you like," Placido Geist said.

The cowboys came into town in a bunch and deployed in front of the hotel. It was eight o'clock in the morning. Most people on the street at that hour found cover, but some stuck around to see the show. They weren't to be disappointed, as the drama was

shaping up and a resolution imminent.

Placido Geist had been interrupted at his breakfast. He found this annoying. After achieving a certain age, there are men who choose not to suffer fools gladly. Besides, his eggs were turning gelid. He sent them back to the kitchen. He'd get fresh eggs, or be dead, in which case it made scant difference.

He stepped out onto the porch. He faced a dozen men.

"You've accused my brother of murder," the tall man sitting on a roan horse said.

"You'd be the eldest Hagerty," Placido Geist said.

"I'd be Peter," the tall man admitted.

"And this would be your brother?" Placido Geist asked. He could see a strong family resemblance in the young man who edged his mount up next to Peter Hagerty's.

"Everybody in town knows who we are."

"They also know your brother to be chickenhearted and a bully, with no stomach for an honest fight, who hides behind his father's hired pistoleros," Placido Geist said.

The younger man jerked his handgun loose, as Placido Geist had expected, and the bounty hunter shot him out of the saddle with his Colt. The horses shied at the gunfire, and there was a moment of indecision. Derek Hagerty lay dead in the street.

Sheriff Duquesne stepped into the silence, a twelve-gauge shotgun held at port arms but both hammers cocked. "There's no further argument here, Peter," he said to Derek's brother.

"This isn't over," Peter Hagerty said.

"Yes it is," the sheriff said. "Your father has remedy in law, but he no longer makes his own."

Hagerty looked at the bounty hunter. "We'll seek you out," he said.

"You're welcome to," Placido Geist told him.

"You should be indicted for manslaughter," Duquesne said.

"I'll surrender myself to the Texas Rangers, and them only. I mean you no offense."

"Old man Hagerty will put a price on your head."

"It won't prove easy money."

The sheriff gazed off into the middle distance. "Hagerty's not a man to forgive," he said.

"See to the whore, if you can," Placido Geist said.

"I'd be hard pressed to see to my own benefit. You've made things more difficult than necessary, all around."

"Every choice has consequences," the bounty hunter said.

They tried for him some four miles out of town. Some deadfall

had been dragged across the trail where it narrowed. There was higher ground on his right, with scrub for cover, and to his left a streambed, wooded on the far bank. The trail took a sharp dogleg, the streambed falling away, and a recent rockslide hid what was around the corner. Here was where the trail had been blocked. It wasn't artful, but it would do. He didn't hesitate to ride on into the trap. He figured two, three at the most. There'd be one across the stream, in the trees, and one in the scrub above. If there were a third man, he'd be lying in wait past the rockslide, to gun the bounty hunter if he got through the barricade. Placido Geist had his .45-70 Sharps in a saddle scabbard and the little Colt tucked at the small of his back, with a break-top Smith & Wesson .44 featuring a nine-inch barrel in a shoulder holster. Hanging from the saddle horn by a lanyard was a twelve-gauge Parker hammerless side-by-side, the barrels cut down to eighteen inches, the shotshells loaded with .25 caliber nickel-plated ball in a cluster of six, each of them double the weight of buckshot.

He knew they'd wait for him to pull up at the barricade, where he'd be sitting on the horse, a stationary target. The streambed might prove treacherous, water trickling over smooth stones, easily dislodged, footing slippery for the mare, and even money she'd break a leg. Which left the high ground to his right.

She was a quick horse, if sometimes stubborn. She'd never failed him in a fight. Fifteen feet from the barricade, he laid her head over and slapped the reins across her withers, urging her up the slope. From a standing start, he could feel her long muscles begin to pull, her lungs swelling.

There was a snap shot from the trees on the far side of the streambed that went wide.

Placido Geist pushed the mare upslope, letting her take her head as he unlimbered the shotgun from the saddle horn.

A man stood up twenty yards in front of him, a rifle in his hands. He was unprepared for this sudden rush.

Placido Geist swung the horse's head aside and fired both barrels of the scattergun, taking the man off at the knees. He made a running dismount, pulling the heavy Sharps out from under the saddle skirt. He was above the rockslide now, looking down on a confused drygulcher on the other side. The man took the 400-grain bullet in his head, spraying bone fragments and brain.

Placido Geist levered out the spent round and thumbed a fresh cartridge into the gun, settling himself behind a crevice in the rocks. The mare had stopped, panting, her reins dangling along the ground.

"You the same three that hanged the kid?" he called out.

There was no answer from the trees along the streambed.

"You kill me, you don't have to tell Farragut Hagerty the truth. You miss your chance, you're dead either way. I were in your shoes, I'd hightail it for Oklahoma or Arkansas."

The man stepped out of the trees. "You won't shoot me?" he asked, arms akimbo.

Placido Geist had thought better of it. "You ride on," he called down to the cowhand. "Whichever direction you go, you'll be looking over your shoulder the rest of your life."

They went their separate ways.

Placido Geist had separate thoughts, as well. We're all guilty of something, he'd already decided. We simply pay for it in our own currency. 🦋

## THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

GP SYO PQKUGUD GUPE Y ZYC CYW IEK MRMKWZECW,  
YUC G IMBP PNM CQBB EBC UYDDGUD FQBB EI  
EPNMK FMEFBM'O PKEQZBM, BGTM Y PEEPNYANM  
WEQ AYU'P BMYRM YBEUM.

—KEOO LYACEUYBC

CIPHER:

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

*Solution on page 59*

# DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 83. The solution to the puzzle will appear in the November issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 126.

## DEFINITIONS

## WORDS

|                            |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| A. Justifying coverage     | 177 | 114 | 4   | 107 | 89  | 77  | 148 | 19  | 63  | 41  |
| B. Skill                   | 82  | 181 | 118 | 100 | 131 | 16  | 135 |     |     |     |
| C. Wedding attendees       | 142 | 184 | 124 | 52  | 6   | 180 |     |     |     |     |
| D. Let                     | 198 | 160 | 117 | 26  | 168 | 75  |     |     |     |     |
| E. Ivy locale              | 68  | 44  | 102 | 154 | 149 | 195 | 49  |     |     |     |
| F. Desperate measures      | 54  | 30  | 70  | 110 | 145 | 73  | 178 | 192 |     |     |
| G. Pattern of flow         | 202 | 134 | 122 | 61  | 2   | 141 |     |     |     |     |
| H. Befuddled               | 155 | 36  | 167 | 7   | 98  | 189 | 67  | 55  | 93  | 207 |
| I. In advance              | 165 | 188 | 10  | 109 | 32  | 140 | 21  | 200 | 48  | 8   |
| J. General survey          | 186 | 65  | 137 | 172 | 104 | 194 | 96  | 50  |     |     |
| K. Comprehensive alliance  | 152 | 17  | 175 | 85  | 3   | 76  | 129 | 74  |     |     |
| L. Corresponds             | 138 | 87  | 12  | 157 | 37  | 203 | 62  |     |     |     |
| M. Drug designation        | 78  | 46  | 127 | 57  | 146 | 106 | 101 |     |     |     |
| N. Sans company            | 59  | 81  | 28  | 206 | 23  | 130 |     |     |     |     |
| O. Postal information      | 183 | 14  | 144 | 187 | 29  | 115 | 179 | 105 | 66  |     |
| P. Entryway device         | 174 | 9   | 191 | 40  | 156 | 99  | 125 | 42  |     |     |
| Q. White English hog       | 176 | 164 | 35  | 159 | 204 | 51  | 103 | 143 | 86  |     |
| R. Word in a Williams work | 121 | 31  | 92  | 147 | 166 | 1   | 20  | 196 | 136 |     |

|     |   |     |   |     |   |     |   |     |   |     |   |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |   |
|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|---|
|     | 1 | R   | 2 | G   | 3 | K   |   | 4   | A | 5   | W | 6   | C  | 7   | H  | 8   | I  |     | 9  | P   | 10 | I   |    |     |    |     |    |     |   |
| 11  | U | 12  | L | 13  | Z | 14  | O | 15  | X | 16  | B |     | 17 | K   | 18 | T   | 19 | A   | 20 | R   | 21 | I   | 22 | S   | 23 | N   | 24 | X   |   |
|     |   | 25  | T | 26  | D |     |   | 27  | X | 28  | N |     | 29 | O   | 30 | F   | 31 | R   | 32 | I   | 33 | Y   | 34 | Z   | 35 | Q   | 36 | H   |   |
| 37  | L | 38  | X | 39  | V | 40  | P | 41  | A |     |   | 42  | P  | 43  | W  | 44  | E  | 45  | V  | 46  | M  |     |    | 47  | T  | 48  | I  | 49  | E |
|     |   | 50  | J | 51  | Q | 52  | C | 53  | S | 54  | F |     |    | 55  | H  | 56  | Z  | 57  | M  |     |    | 58  | Z  | 59  | N  | 60  | U  | 61  | G |
| 62  | L |     |   | 63  | A | 64  | Y | 65  | J | 66  | O |     |    | 67  | H  | 68  | E  | 69  | Y  |     |    | 70  | F  | 71  | U  | 72  | T  |     |   |
| 73  | F | 74  | R | 75  | D |     |   | 76  | K | 77  | A | 78  | M  | 79  | W  | 80  | X  |     |    | 81  | N  | 82  | B  |     |    | 83  | S  |     |   |
| 84  | T | 85  | K | 86  | Q | 87  | L | 88  | S |     |   | 89  | A  | 90  | U  | 91  | V  | 92  | R  | 93  | H  |     |    | 94  | S  | 95  | W  | 96  | J |
|     |   | 97  | V | 98  | H | 99  | P | 100 | B | 101 | M | 102 | E  | 103 | Q  | 104 | J  | 105 | O  |     |    | 106 | M  | 107 | A  |     |    | 108 | Z |
| 109 | I | 110 | F | 111 | X | 112 | S | 113 | U | 114 | A | 115 | O  | 116 | W  |     |    | 117 | D  | 118 | B  | 119 | V  |     |    | 120 | T  | 121 | R |
| 122 | G | 123 | X | 124 | C | 125 | P | 126 | Z | 127 | M | 128 | Y  | 129 | K  | 130 | N  | 131 | B  | 132 | S  |     |    | 133 | Y  | 134 | G  | 135 | B |
| 136 | R | 137 | J |     |   | 138 | L | 139 | V | 140 | I |     |    | 141 | G  | 142 | C  | 143 | Q  | 144 | O  | 145 | F  | 146 | M  | 147 | R  | 148 | A |
|     |   | 149 | E | 150 | Z |     |   | 151 | S | 152 | K | 153 | T  | 154 | E  |     |    | 155 | H  | 156 | P  |     |    | 157 | L  | 158 | X  | 159 | Q |
| 160 | D | 161 | Z | 162 | Y |     |   | 163 | U | 164 | Q |     |    | 165 | I  | 166 | R  |     |    | 167 | H  | 168 | D  | 169 | T  | 170 | S  | 171 | U |
| 172 | J | 173 | X | 174 | P |     |   | 175 | K | 176 | Q |     |    | 177 | A  | 178 | F  | 179 | O  | 180 | C  | 181 | B  | 182 | W  |     |    | 183 | O |
| 184 | C |     |   | 185 | T | 186 | J | 187 | O | 188 | I |     |    | 189 | H  | 190 | V  | 191 | P  | 192 | F  | 193 | Z  | 194 | J  | 195 | E  | 196 | K |
|     |   | 197 | X | 198 | D | 199 | Y |     |   | 200 | I | 201 | T  | 202 | G  | 203 | L  | 204 | Q  | 205 | W  | 206 | N  | 207 | H  |     |    |     |   |

S. Parade figure

88 83 151 170 53 112 132 94 22

T. Hardly rehearsed

25 185 120 201 47 169 18 153 72 84

U. Completely

163 90 113 60 171 11 71

V. Taco topping

45 139 91 97 119 39 190

W. Adverse

95 5 116 205 79 43 182

X. Document for a bishop

173 38 111 15 123 24 158 80 27 197

Y. Buying method

69 33 162 128 133 64 199

Z. Asian canine: 2 wds.

161 56 193 150 13 126 58 108 34



# REEL CRIME

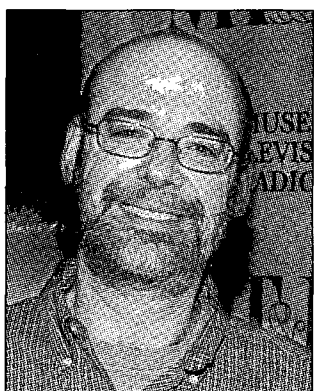
STEVE HOCKENSMITH

**A**ndy Breckman doesn't have a closet full of identical suits. He's not afraid of heights, crowds, germs, needles, snakes, mushrooms, children, or clowns. He's perfectly capable of using a public restroom, and he doesn't buy Lysol by the crate.

But Breckman has at least one thing in common with Adrian Monk, the obsessive-compulsive-hypochondriac TV sleuth he helped create.

"I don't like change," says Breckman, who guides the quirky detective's adventures as executive producer of the popular USA Network series *Monk*. "It's always scary . . . at least to me."

Like it or not, though, Breckman had to accept that things wouldn't be quite the same when *Monk* kicked off its fifth season this July. For one thing, the series was back on Friday nights but at a new time: nine P.M. EST instead of ten P.M. And there'd be a new mystery series in *Monk's* old slot. (More on that later.)



Andy Breckman. Photo courtesy USA Network.

And USA announced that *Monk* would go into strip (i.e., daily) rotation on the network as of 2008.

Yet despite all that, Breckman vows that one thing will remain exactly the same: the show itself. Viewers who tune in for the fifth season will see the neurotic Monk (Tony Shalhoub) go to a class reunion, reunite with his father, and encounter a deranged actor (Stanley Tucci) who thinks he's Adrian Monk. What viewers won't see are melodramatic plot twists or silly sweeps-week stunts.

"We're not going to kill off a major character or have Monk come out of the closet," jokes Breckman, who started his career as a stand-up comic and later worked as a staff writer for *Late Night with David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live*. "It's better not to get fancy with these gimmicks other shows do. I think it's harder to find a tight formula and stick to it, but that's what we do."

Breckman's so committed to that formula, he's even nixed network requests for crossovers with shows like *Las Vegas* and *Crossing Jordan*, which air on USA corporate sibling NBC. And it's not just because he's stunt-phobic. He simply can't imagine his hero making sense anywhere but on Planet Monk.

"Our show exists in a totally different world," Breckman explains. "For example, we're a contemporary crime show, but the cops don't ever use computers or DNA or fiber evidence. And we don't use informers and we don't do sex crimes. We play by our own stodgy, retro rules."

Breckman even calls *Monk* "the anti-CSI." Instead of emphasizing gruesome forensic procedures and flashy visuals, *Monk* relies on the kind of old-school clues Breckman grew to love when he was reading Sherlock Holmes stories (and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*) as a kid.

"We like to come up with stories that, in theory at least, Arthur Conan Doyle could have done," Breckman says. "The quintessential *Monk* mystery for us was the episode where a guy kills a woman on a clock tower and lays her body on the minute hand. Then he goes downstairs and establishes an alibi. And the minute hand ticks down until her body finally slides off, so it looks like she jumped at eight twenty. That's the kind of stuff *CSI* does not do. To me, it's so elegant. It could have been written in 1904."

Of course, twenty-first century audiences aren't usually wowed by "elegance." It's razzle-dazzle they crave—or so the conventional wisdom goes. Yet *Monk's* old-fashioned puzzle mysteries have been embraced by millions of viewers, making the series one of the biggest hits on basic cable. Even the departure of co-star Bitty Schram (who played *Monk's* assistant Sharona through the first two and a half seasons) couldn't put a dent in the show's popularity. The series forged on with a new assistant for *Monk* (played by Traylor Howard), and the ratings actually went up.

The show's been such a success, in fact, that USA pre-ordered a sixth season. Which means Adrian Monk will keep on catching killers (and exasperating everyone around him) through at least 2008.



*The cast of Monk. Photo by Andrew Eccles, courtesy of USA Network.*

After that, however, Shalhoub's contract runs out—as does Breckman's. But don't worry, *Monkies*. Breckman promises that the dangling plot thread about Monk's murdered wife will be tied up in the show's final episode . . . whenever it might come.

"I've started kicking around ideas," says Breckman (who also wrote the *Monk* pilot based on an idea by veteran producer David Hoberman). "Answers will be given."

Arthur Conan Doyle wouldn't have had it any other way.

**S**teve Franks likes *CSI*, but he's got one big problem with it: It's taken all the fun out of murder. "It seems like all the [crime] shows now are about death and dismemberment," Franks says. "It never looks like anyone's having any fun. It's joy-less. I like mysteries with a sense of fun to them."

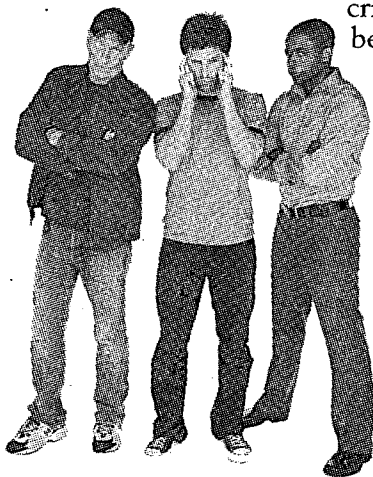
So there was only one thing Franks could do: create his own crime show. A fun one. And lo and behold, not only is it on the air, it's been paired with another mystery series in which yuks are more important than yucks—*Monk*.

Franks's USA Network series *Psych* premiered in July in *Monk*'s old time slot. Like *Monk*, the show revolves around an eccentric genius who uses his gift for observation to solve mysteries. But *Psych*'s hero, Shawn Spencer (a charmingly glib James Roday), is no anxiety-plagued neurotic. He's Adrian Monk's (bi)polar opposite—a happy-go-lucky slacker who's drawn to detective work because, well, just cuz it's cool. So cool, in

fact, that Spencer's willing to fake his way into new cases by pretending to be a crime-solving psychic.

"He's just like, 'Wow—how awesome is this? We get to be Starsky and Hutch!'" says Franks, an exuberant thirty-eight-year-old who calls "the pursuit of fun" his own mission in life.

Appropriately enough for someone who's all about fun and make-believe, Franks got his big break at Disneyland. Sort of. While working in the Magic Kingdom in the late nineties, he pounded out a spec script about an irresponsible guy who adopts a child just to impress his girlfriend.

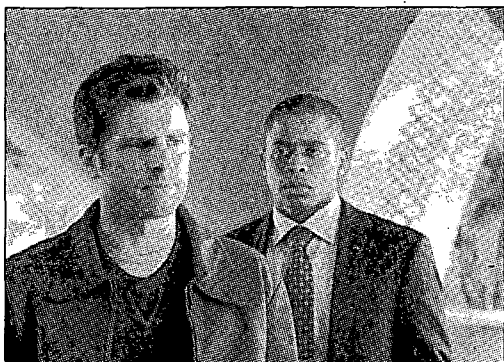


Corbin Bernsen, James Roday, and Dule Hill. Photo by Kwaku Alston, courtesy of USA Network.

"I literally wrote it while I was supposed to be in the Tiki Room making sure the birds weren't catching on fire," Franks recalls.

What caught fire was Franks's career. The screenplay—*Big Daddy*—was snatched up by Columbia Pictures and became a huge hit for Adam Sandler.

"After *Big Daddy*, the studio signed me to a blind deal, which means I go and pitch them five ideas, and if they want one they pay a set price for it," Franks says. "So I pitch them all my ideas, and they're like, No. No. No. No. No. No. But one of my pitches was about a guy who's so good at talking his way out of trouble that he's able to convince the cops he's a psychic detective. So they hire him, and he solves the case. I put that in my back pocket and thought, I'll do it later."



James Roday and Dule Hill in the pilot for *Psych*. Photo by Jeff Weddell, courtesy of USA Network.

"Later" came after he grew frustrated with the grind of television's annual pilot season. Though each year he landed a new deal to write another sitcom pilot, none of the projects ever got off the ground. So eventually, Franks reached into his back pocket for *Psych*.

"The half-hour [pilots] weren't that fun anyway. They were just setup-joke, setup-joke, setup-joke," says Franks, who, like Breckman, toiled as a standup comic early in his career. "I always wanted to do *Moonlighting* or *Magnum P.I.* So I finally said, I don't care if no one will buy it. I'm going to try to do a one-hour show this year. And I took it to USA because *Monk* is one of my favorite shows, and this seemed like a really good fit."

Obviously, USA agreed—though it's only ordered eleven episodes so far. After they've run . . . well, even a slick-tongued pseudo-psychic like Shawn Spencer would think twice about predicting the decisions of an American television network.

But whatever *Psych*'s fate, Franks knows he'll have succeeded in at least one respect.

"I feel like I'm creating a show that I would want to watch," he says. "So if nothing else, I got the chance to create my own favorite show."



# SURVIVING SPOUSE

---

DOUG ALLYN

**T**erminated. Canned. Pink-slipped. Donald Trump smirking on TV. "You're fired!"

I stared blankly at the pages that were ending my life as I knew it.

Professor Alex R. Creighton, MS, blah blah . . . suspended, pending further . . . blah blah. Not recommended for contract renewal at this time.

Forget the academic camouflage. The final line was the only one that mattered. I was toast. That's what the words actually meant. Fired.

Dr. DeLyle was looking at me. Waiting for an outburst. A tale to share in delicious whispers in the instructors' lounge. Poor Creighton. Crumbled and wailed like a baby when he got the sack.

I felt like wailing. Didn't though. Pretending to scan the contract, I desperately scrolled through my options. Beg and plead? No point. DeLyle couldn't change the board's decision. Maybe I should stonewall, deny everything, threaten to sue—

As if reading my mind, DeLyle shook his head.

"The girl came forward with a video, Cray. The two of you in her dorm room, *en flagrante*. Good Lord, man, what were you thinking? Ah. You didn't know she was filming, did you? They film everything, these kids. Use cell phones, mini cams. You'll be lucky if you don't end up all over the Internet. But it's not the end of the world. You're a young man, you made a mistake. Perhaps the board will reconsider next term."

We both knew he was lying, but I didn't bother to call him on it. I was down to my final card.

Ion's death. If I claimed I was emotionally disturbed, checked myself into a clinic . . . No. Couldn't do that. There was a limit to how low I'd go. It wouldn't work anyway. A porn video of me with a coed would trump a temporary insanity defense. Why give them the satisfaction? Face it, my job at Hancock University was over. No tenure, no health plan. I'd be lucky to get temp work.

Fired. Sweet Jesus. One helluva year. A dead boy, a wrecked career.







Rising on rubber knees, I thanked DeLyle for his courtesy.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Creighton," DeLyle said, offering his hand. "You're a brilliant systems engineer with a bright future. Put this behind you, my boy. Move on."

"Thank you, Doctor. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

But I wasn't fine. My guts were churning as I hurried through DeLyle's outer office. Stumbling into the nearest men's room stall, I dropped to my knees and retched up everything but my spleen.

Huddled there awhile, shivering, hugging the porcelain, drooling into the bowl, trying to gag down the nausea.

*Fired. My God, Thelma's going to kill me.*

At the time I thought it was a figure of speech.

The duplex was dark when I pulled in the drive. Rumanian music playing on the stereo. Before Ion arrived, Thelma spent weeks tracking down Rumanian folk songs online to make our adopted son feel at home.

It meant nothing to Ion, of course. He'd never heard the music before. The rattletrap orphanage at Cluj didn't have hot water, to say nothing of a sound system.

Still, Thelma insisted on nurturing Ion's cultural heritage, though the last thing the kid wanted was reminders of Rumania. He adored everything American, from Big Macs to SpongeBob SquarePants. A brilliant boy. Even picked up the variance between Thelma's Georgia drawl and my Indiana twang. Conversed with us in our respective accents, as if we spoke separate languages. Which isn't so far off.

I walked through the darkened duplex to the small deck out back. Thelma was in her bathrobe in the dusk, alone at the picnic table, face swollen, tear stained. Her normal look these past months.

Bottle of Jack Daniel's on the table, half gone. Her service revolver beside it.

*Sweet Jesus. She already knows. And she really is going to kill me.*

But when she looked up, her eyes barely registered my presence, as if her thoughts were in a far country. I started to sit down but she waved me off.

"Go away, Cray."

"Thel—"

"Leave me be!" I froze as her hand brushed the revolver, then moved on to the bottle. "I can't take this, Cray. Not one more day."

"That gun's no answer."

"There aren't no answers for a thing like this."

Reflex. I nearly corrected her English. And for a moment, because I'd just read it, the surviving spouse clause in my instruc-

tor's insurance package flashed into my mind. Death by misadventure. Payout, half a million. If I actually did as she asked, turned and walked away . . .

Bile surged up at the back of my throat, gagging me. "Calm down, Thel. That's the whiskey talking."

"No, it's your lil' ole mush-mouth wahf talkin'. Only as usual, you don't hear me. Look, we might as well face up to it, our gettin' married was a big mistake. Bangin' a campus cop with your roommates gigglin' outside in the hall had to be a great college-boy fantasy. If you hadn't knocked me up—but we lost that baby, and now we've lost Ion. I embarrass you at faculty parties—"

"No you don't."

"Yes I damn well do, but I don't care anymore! Those people bore the hell out of me, Cray. All they talk about are folks who wrote books about other folks who wrote books. Claim to be free thinkers and every last one's a Jane Fonda Democrat, couldn't change a goddamn tire if their lives depended on it. I don't belong here, and I can't take it anymore. I have to go."

"Where?"

"What?"

"If you leave," I said reasonably, "where will you go?"

Thelma blinked, trying to refocus.

"I—don't know. My mom moved down to Taos with her new husband. Maybe I can go there, stay with them. Or maybe Florida. As far from here as I can get."

"And as far from me?"

"I don't hate you, Cray. I don't even blame you. I just feel godawful sorry for the both of us, and that's a lousy way to feel about a marriage."

"How will you get there?"

"I don't know! A bus. We came here on a bus."

"Look, Thel, I've had a really tough day. Can we sleep on this? Talk it through in the morning?"

"I won't feel any different."

"Then it won't matter, will it? C'mon, you look exhausted."

"Thanks for sharing that. And you're sleeping in the den."

I started to object but didn't. Something in her eyes told me not to.

"Will you at least let me have the gun?"

"No chance. Mr. Colt here's the best friend I've got. And he guarantees I'll be sleeping alone."

"I thought you said you weren't angry."

"No, I said I didn't hate you, Cray. If I did, you might be dead already."

She shuffled off to bed, shapeless in her bathrobe, taking the gun and bourbon with her. No question, she would definitely be sleeping alone.

Grabbing a beer out of the fridge, I checked the caller ID on the kitchen phone as I passed—my God! Tiffany had called. To tell Thel about that damned video? Probably.

And I wondered if Thelma had been trying to drink up enough courage to kill herself? Or me?

Couldn't sleep. The couch was lumpy, and I yearned for my own bed and Thelma's warmth. But I remembered her lifeless eyes. And Mr. Colt. And decided a restless night was preferable to a permanent nap.

So I lay there, fingers laced behind my neck. Brooding. This job was over. No saving it.

What were you thinking? DeLyle had asked.

I had no answer. The past few years had been desperate, me working to establish myself as a brilliant young instructor worthy of tenure while Thelma struggled to fit in. And failed.

She was right about that. As a campus cop back at Notre Dame, she'd been a trophy girlfriend. Thelma Fox, Sergeant Foxy. But as a young prof's wife at Hancock U? Most of my colleagues dismissed her as soon as they heard her accent, as though Southern syllables indicate brain damage. And her flawed diction usually confirmed their impression. Working class. Born and bred. If she hadn't gotten pregnant . . .

But Thel miscarried a few months after we arrived at Hancock, a loss that also ended her hopes for motherhood. A long, dark recovery afterward. And I wasn't much help. Absorbed in jump-starting my career, I couldn't spare the time to empathize with the former Sergeant Foxy. Or maybe I already sensed I'd never scale the academic heights with an albatross on my neck.

She shoved the adoption at me as a fait accompli. She'd already done the legwork, made the contacts. Basically, we could ransom a kid from a Rumanian orphanage for twenty grand, practically every dime we'd saved.

I had major doubts, but Thel steamrolled them. And she was absolutely right. Ion was a pure delight. Until the blood disorder the Rumanians had concealed kicked in. He wasted and died in a few months. And took our marriage with him.

Thel fell into a total funk, and I blundered into an affair with the first hot-to-trot coed who came along. And apparently chose one with a fetish for photography.

As an undergrad I was considered exceptionally bright. Well, I'd

certainly made a brilliant botch of my life. And Thelma's too, I suppose.

Question was, now what?

For openers, I would need a new job. No large university would hire me now. I might be able to land a position at some backwater junior college . . . God. The truth was, I'd been restless here. What would it be like two rungs down the academic ladder? My father died broke because he kept drifting from job to job. Had I inherited his curse?

I woke to the aroma of toast. And fresh coffee.

Thelma was up, bustling around the kitchen. First time in months. Haggard, wearing her faded Notre Dame Campus Police sweatshirt and jeans, her sandy hair pulled back in a taut ponytail.

"Want some eggs, Cray?"

"Eggs? You know the cholesterol—"

"Right now, a coronary sounds pretty good. Anyway, I'm starving. You want eggs or not?"

"Um, sure. Are you all right?"

"Just ducky." Actually, she did look a bit better, moving with grim purpose, at least. And I'd forgotten how sinfully scrumptious a country breakfast could be. I took a quick shower and dressed. There was enough food on the table to feed the Confederate army.

"Did you give any thought to our situation, Cray?"

"Some. Ladies first."

"Okay. I'm gone. Out of here. I'll pack today and clean the house. But come Monday, I'm on the first bus south."

"Jesus, Thel—"

"Don't even ask, Cray. One more week and I'm liable to shoot one of us in the head. I have to go."

"But what about money? We only have a few grand left."

She stared at me, her eyes suddenly liquid. Unreadable. I thought I'd scored a palpable hit. I was wrong.

"This came in the mail yesterday," she said, placing an envelope beside my plate. A letter from the International Red Cross Adoption Agency. With a carefully worded message of condolence. And a certified check for twenty-six thousand dollars. I stared at it, then at Thelma.

"Full reimbursement, Cray. Every cent we spent to adopt Ion, plus funeral expenses. We actually came out a few hundred ahead. The University Credit Union closes at one on Saturdays. I'll take my half in cash, please."

I needed a bank officer's okay for the check, which was convenient

since I also needed to liquidate our duplex. They're reserved for university employees, and I wouldn't qualify much longer.

"Divesting will be no problem, Professor Creighton, we have a waiting list for those units." The officer was an ash blond middle-ager whose brightly flowered spring dress made her look anemic. A few quick calculations on her PalmPilot. "Minus our three percent management fee, your return will be seventy-three thousand, four hundred and twelve dollars. If you're going to reinvest in a home locally, we'll be happy to—"

I said I'd get back to her on that. Walked out of the Credit Union totally bemused.

Yesterday I'd had roughly five grand, today I was worth a hundred thousand plus. And all I'd done was bury my adopted child and get fired.

I headed home, my head humming like a hive. At a traffic light, I was blinded momentarily by a flickering glare. Like someone signaling me with a mirror.

No message. Only sunlight glittering off a bright chrome bumper. A yellow VW Beetle rotating slowly on a display turntable in a car lot. I glanced idly down the line of cars. And stopped. Fourth from the left in the front row. A Mercury Cougar, XR-7. Deep metallic green. Classic Detroit iron from the seventies. Not one of the popular muscle cars but very special to me.

As if drawn by a magnet, I pulled my battered Volvo into the lot. Sat there eyeing the Cougar. In no hurry to get home and help Thelma pack.

"A beauty, ain't she? Step out, take a good look at her." A salesman sauntered over, JCPenney's suit, plastic smile.

I scanned the row of aging, high mileage beaters, priced for quick turnover in a college town. Halfway down, a kid was washing a blue Pinto. Me, sweating for minimum wage when I was fifteen. When owning any car at all was only a dream. Working with Red Bauer.

A real character, Red. An old time salesman who'd steal your shorts in a deal and leave you smiling. Maybe that's why I stopped. To flash back to the last summer of my childhood. When I was virginally green, blissfully ignorant. And happy.

Or maybe it was the car. An XR-7 had been my dream car that summer. Red took one in on trade, and I polished it every single day. And ached for it at night.

Red steered buyers away from the Merc for awhile. But in August he drifted, moving on the way salesmen do. Soon after, the XR-7 was gone too. Sold to a hot-rodder who gutted it for the engine.

I finished out that summer, but the spell had been broken. The car lot was just a job. And I wasn't a kid anymore.

But this salesman was no Red Bauer. His name tag said Bob. He assumed I'd stopped for the V-dub and kept pitching it as I drifted down the line to the Mercury. Amid the econo-boxes and Japanese beetles, this American road hog was totally out of place, a gauche, gas-guzzling crime against the environment. I asked Bob which engine it had. Didn't know. So I popped the hood.

Whoa! A monster. A 351 Cobra Jet V-8. Two hundred sixty-four horsepower, high performance suspension, dual exhausts. Looked tight, no oil drips, original seals. Interior was clean too, no wear on the pedals. Even the floor mats were original.

"It's easier on gas than you'd might think, and it's a real comfy ride." Which told me Bob was too lazy to do his homework, didn't know squat about this car. Or any other, probably.

"Who was the previous owner?"

Didn't know that either. It didn't matter.

"With my Volvo in trade, what am I looking at?"

He started some lame patter about the trade but I cut him off.

"Just give me the bottom line, please. Cash. Right now."

He said four, I said two, he said three and a half was absolute rock bottom. I said I might go twenty-two fifty and he laughed, shaking his head. Not a chance, he said. But I knew that was his price.

We settled on twenty-six, then went into the small modular office at the end of the lot. Plastic paneling, grimy vinyl chairs, stench of stale cigarettes and desperation. Very familiar. I half expected Red Bauer to walk through the door.

Instead, Bob jotted a few notes, said he had to clear the deal with his boss, and vanished into an inner office.

Came out looking like somebody'd stomped his puppy. "I'm real sorry, Mr. Creighton, but I misread the invoice on that Mercury. We can't sell it for that price. We need another five hundred just to break even. This is totally my fault, and the boss is really steamed at me. Can you do another five? No, wait, since it was my mistake, I'll even toss in my commission. We'll give it to you for twenty-eight fifty. Deal?"

"Let's talk to your boss first." I brushed past him into the inner office without knocking. Expected it to be empty, but a fat guy with a brush cut, horn rims, bilious green shirt was stuffed behind a battered metal desk. Stanley Zawicki, manager, the name tag said.

"Hi, Mr. Zawicki. Bob here told me he misread the invoice, but actually he made two mistakes."

"I don't understand," Zawicki said.

"First, I'm not Mister Creighton, I'm Professor Creighton. I teach at Hancock U. Second, you just tried a very tired scam on



somebody who grew up in this business. So here's the deal. I know your target price for that Merc is twenty-two fifty—"

"Wait a sec," Bob stammered, "how—?"

"Shut up, Bob," Zawicki said.

"So I can give you the twenty-two fifty right now. In cash. Or I can file a formal complaint with the university, get your lot black-listed for deceptive sales practices, and you'll be flat bust by the Fourth of July. What's it going to be, guys?"

Thelma stepped out on the porch as the Cougar's big exhausts rumbled into the driveway. Her frown deepened when I got out of the car.

"What on earth is that?"

"A '75 Mercury Cougar. It's big, it's comfortable, and the Volvo wouldn't make Taos."

"Taos? What are you talking about?"

"Look, I know I haven't been Mr. Sensitivity lately, or anytime, for that matter, but I can't just put you on a bus out of town."

"Why not?"

"Because last night I found you sitting in the dark, half plastered, with a gun in your hand. I don't think you should be alone right now. Maybe I shouldn't be either. So what I'd like to do is drive you down to your mom's place in Taos. We can take our time, see some country, maybe talk a little. How does that sound?"

"Like you've got a death wish. What about your job? The semester won't be over for three weeks."

"I've already cleared it with DeLyle. They can manage without me."

"I . . . see. Well. That's very considerate, Cray. It really isn't necessary, but thank you."

"You're welcome. How do you like the car?"

"You don't want to know," she said.

**I**f you need a coup de grace for a rocky marriage, closing up a house you've lived in for three years is a guaranteed deal-breaker. By the time we finished packing and stacking Thel's things in the living room, we were barely speaking. Not that we'd been exactly chattering away before.

But on Monday morning, our bags were in the Merc's trunk. I'd arranged for a moving company to pick up our things, ship Thel's to Taos, put mine in storage.

Time to go.

"Ground rules," she said as she climbed into the Cougar. "I'm in

no mood for conversation, okay? Second, I know you've been lying to me for months about—hell, almost everything. Don't lie to me anymore, Cray. Not even a fib. If you do . . . Well, just don't."

"No chitchat, no fibs," I said. "Sounds like a fun trip."

"Not to me."

She wasn't kidding. Two hundred miles. Rolling southbound, down through the hills and farms of northern Michigan. Handsome country. No comment. She was staring out the windows, but I doubt she saw any of it. I was glad the Cougar didn't have tinted glass, the mood in the car was dark enough already.

At mile two hundred and seventy, just above the Indiana border, we stopped for gas. I asked Thel if she wanted to drive, she passed. A negative. Usually, she likes driving.

Somewhere around mile three-ten, heading west on 80, she asked, "Why this particular car, Cray?"

"I told you, the Volvo—"

"Right, but the Volvo was you. Practical, trendy, good gas mileage. A professor's car. This thing's a moose. It's some kind of a muscle car, right?"

"It'll definitely run out, but it's not impractical. The weight to horsepower ratio is so skewed the engine never strains. It's big, it's roomy, it's loafing at seventy, and since I cut a great deal, it's probably gaining value as we drive."

"My God, you can even make a hot rod sound logical. I didn't know you cared anything about cars."

"I don't anymore. I went through a car-crazy phase in high school. Worked at a car lot, read up on them, memorized all the specs."

"Easy enough for you, I suppose. So back then you liked cars, but now you don't?"

"I'm not fifteen anymore."

"You never were," she said, turning back to the scenery.

"It wasn't just the cars," I said defensively, trying to keep her talking. "There was a salesman I admired. I was trying to impress him."

"Already a politician? At fifteen?"

"It wasn't like that. I was a kid and sometimes Red would talk to me. Man to man, you know? It meant a lot at that age."

"What did you two talk about?"

"Cars. Life. Everything. He was a low rent philosopher. Claimed people always laugh at the truth."

"What does that mean?"

"Most of what we hear isn't true. TV ads, politicians' speeches, even your neighbor's golf score. So when you actually hear the

truth, about anything, you're so surprised you laugh. It's a reflex. For instance, when I was haggling over this car, I said a number and the salesman laughed. So I knew that was his bottom line."

"Just because he laughed?"

"Hearing the right price startled him, so he chuckled. Couldn't help it."

"Okay, professor, tell me something that's true. See if I chuckle."

"Like what?"

"Any truth. The bigger the better. If you remember how."

Touché. "Okay, of all the billions of creatures on this planet, whales, apes, insects, we're the only ones who actually know we're going to die. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"That's a great truth?" she snorted.

"It must be, you're smiling a little." And she was.

"Here's another truth. I've been a lousy husband, but I still care about you."

No smile this time. Turned away instead, staring out the window while the miles rolled by and the daylight bled slowly away.

Another fuel stop on the outskirts of Chicago. The countryside was changing now, from verdant hill country to the stolid plains of the farm belt Midwest.

As dusk settled in, I asked Thel what she'd like do about dinner. She didn't care, neither did I. We settled for gas station sandwiches at a truck stop on the Illinois line. Munched them in silence on the road.

I was in a zone by then, a part of the machine, cruising seven miles over the limit, the big Cougar rumbling through the darkness in a tireless lope. Knowing our destination was still far ahead, satisfied just to be rolling up the miles.

Around nine, I felt myself fading, started looking for a motel. Naturally, there weren't any. We were somewhere between Davenport and Des Moines, middle of nowhere, Iowa. Finally jumped off the freeway at Iowa City. The Holiday Inn was full up, some kind of carnival in town. No rooms at Best Western either.

Settled for a Motel 6, a concrete warehouse for nomads. The East Indian deskman, Mr. Patel, apologized for the overcrowding, apologized for the carnival noise, and for the packed parking lot, which looked a lot like a carnival, beater pickup trucks and campers crammed from end to end. A party going on, drunks sitting around a trash barrel campfire. Our sorrowful host only had two rooms left, one smoking, one non, likely the last two rooms in town, he explained.

We took them both. Thelma's idea. I was too tired to argue. My

room was tiny, dank, and reeked of stale cigarette breath. Better than dying behind the wheel but not much. Frayed bedcover, rocky mattress, and I was asleep approximately three seconds after my head hit the pillow.

Snapped awake a couple of hours later, so groggy I wasn't sure what had dragged me up from the depths. Noise. The party outside was turning ugly. People yelling, bottles smashing, drunken curses.

Groggy, still half asleep, I padded to the window. A push-and-shove had broken out by the ice machine. Three carnies, scuffling over the last bag of ice. Our hapless host was trying to separate them, a major mistake, since it gave the three roughnecks a common enemy: a brown-skinned immigrant.

They were jostling him around, hard, bouncing him from one to the other like a beach ball while their drunken buddies egged them on. Patel kept trying to apologize, then suddenly reached his limit. Swinging wildly, the little guy landed a pretty good punch on the biggest carnie, bloodying his nose, sitting him down hard on the seat of his grimy jeans. The crowd went instantly silent.

The game had just changed, and they knew their man. The big guy stood up slowly, wiping his nose on his wrist, unimpressed by the sight of his own blood. He'd seen it before. Hard as a railroad tie with jailhouse tats on his bare arms, the carnie was a foot taller than Patel, and a hundred pounds heavier. But that wasn't enough of an edge.

Swiping his hand over the top of his work boot, he came up with an Arkansas pig sticker, ten inches of gleaming steel, razor-back sharp.

Patel's coffee complexion went ashen. He tried to apologize, it didn't matter. The carnie meant to bleed him, I could read the glittering madness in his eyes from thirty feet away. Grinning, he flicked the blade back and forth in front of Patel's face, the knife flashing like heat lightning. I fumbled for the phone to call 911, knowing it was already too late—

An explosion in the parking lot! Gunshot!

"Police officer! That's enough of that! Drop that sticker, you piece of shit, or the next round's between your eyes!"

Thelma, still dressed for bed in her T-shirt and panties, barefoot, hair tousled, eyes wild. With her service revolver aimed directly at the big carnie's head, two-hand hold.

But he was too drunk to care, or too crazy. Instead of backing off, the big guy yanked Patel in front of him as a shield, holding the knife to his throat. Bad idea. Patel was too small to cover him.

Thel didn't hesitate. Shot the carnie through the calf, knocking his pins out from under him. Patel broke free, fleeing like he was on fire

as the big guy went down, screaming, clutching his bloodied leg. Pandemonium, rednecks running for their campers, tires howling, metal smashing. Pickups bouncing off each other like bumper cars as they raced away.

Grabbing my suitcase and shoes, I sprinted out the door.

"Come on!" I shouted, hauling Thelma toward the Mercury. "Time to go!"

"We have to wait for the police—"

"Don't be nuts! Fifty drunks will tell one story, you'll tell another, and we'll all sit in the slam for a month while the locals figure it out. Get in!"

Dropping the big XR in gear, I floored it, roaring out of the lot amid the ragtag vehicle stampede. Found the freeway and headed west with the hammer down. The muscle car lived up to its name, rocketing through the night like a big cat, ninety, a hundred, a hundred and ten.

"Slow down," Thelma said quietly. "You'll get busted for speeding."

I opened my mouth to argue, then shut it. She was right. I eased off the gas as she fumbled in the back seat for my jacket, wrapped herself in it. Dead to the world in under a minute.

Didn't blame her. I was exhausted myself, but buzzed too high on adrenalin to sleep. Glanced at Thel from time to time, but she never stirred. I could smell whiskey, and I wondered how far gone she was. Drinking to sleep, shooting up parking lots. Maybe her mom could straighten her out. God knows, I had no clue. I can barely manage myself.

What would happen after Taos? If Thel wanted out, I'd certainly given her cause. And from a purely selfish point of view, getting my career back on the fast track would require serious politicking at my next job. And Thel was right, she has no talent for the social climbing that's so crucial in the academic whirl. As a professor's wife, she was a liability. A clean break might be best for both of us. It would be the smart move. And I'm a bright guy. Or so people keep telling me.

So I drove on, bleary eyed, counting the markers, counting Cadillacs, anything to stay awake. But that only works for so long. Around four thirty I caught myself nodding out. Wasn't even sure which state we were in anymore. Maybe Nebraska, somewhere south of Lincoln.

Leaving the freeway, I pulled into a deserted roadside park facing a small lake. The sign said closed for the season, but I was too tired to care. Considered climbing into the back seat, but conked out before I made it.

Woke with the sun in my eyes. So groggy it took me a moment

to remember where we were and how we got here.

We?

The passenger seat was empty. Fully awake now, I looked around, taking stock. Small roadside park, vacant, picnic tables chained together, a defunct cement fountain. No bathroom, not even a porta-john.

No Thelma, either. Got out of the car. Maybe she'd gone looking for some bushes to—no. My God.

The lake wasn't large, only a mile or so across, smooth and bright as a copper mirror, glowing in the morning light. Out near the middle, at least two hundred yards from shore, Thelma. Nothing showing but her face, her shoulders. Floating.

And for a minute I was afraid—but then she moved, paddling a little, turning to reposition herself across the gentle swells.

I had no idea what to do. Didn't know what she was doing out there. Swimming? After the night we'd had? Unlikely.

Suicide? A definite possibility. But if so, she'd managed it well. Because there wasn't a thing I could do but watch. If she wanted to be gone, she could be. No way could I reach her in time.

Half a mil. That's what her death would be worth to me as a surviving spouse. Half a million dollars. More money than my father'd earned in his entire life. Or that I was likely to, after the muck I'd made of my career.

A lot of money. And money always matters. Especially when you don't have it.

But I wouldn't be collecting today. As if reading my thoughts, Thel rolled over and started swimming strongly for shore, knifing through the swells, coming on like Jaws.

Splashed out of the water, hugging herself, shivering, wearing only her panties and bra, both transparent from the water. The first time I'd seen her nude in months. Since Ion. She'd lost weight. Looked spare, almost gaunt.

I loaned her my coat.

"Where are we?" she asked, her lips blue, teeth chattering.

"In Nebraska, I think. I'm not sure where. Are you all right?"

"No. I feel like absolute shit. I'm going to quit drinking. It doesn't help and it's making me crazy."

"You think? You shot a man last night."

"He deserved it."

"Even so—"

"Know what, Cray? I think when I'm old and tired, my biggest regret will be the jerks I didn't shoot. I'm freezing, let's go."

We drove through the morning, stopped for brunch and gas at an IHOP in Grand Island, cleaned up as best we could in the

restrooms, then settled into a silent flight out of Nebraska. Leaving 80 at the Colorado line, we swung south on 76, heading for Denver, the last leg of our run. And the last of us.

Southern Colorado by evening, rocketing down 25, the sun dying in a blaze of glory amid the Great Sand Dunes. And I was beginning to burn out myself. Nearing the border, the Cougar was low on gas and so were we. Decided to pack it in for the night in Pueblo.

Found a better motel this time, Ryder's Hacienda. And it really was. A three story adobe inn, its horseshoe shape enclosing a charming courtyard with open-air dining. Wrought-iron railings and a winding staircase decked with hanging vases. Airy, elegant, very Southwest, very welcome after the long ride.

Separate rooms again. But we agreed to meet in the courtyard for dinner, eightish. Our last? Probably.

My room was dark, with heavy Spanish furniture, a fruit basket, and a small wet bar. None of which mattered. I barely managed to kick off my shoes before I fell on the bed and swept off into the darkness.

Woke a few hours later, feeling surprisingly fresh. Took a long shower, dressed carefully, tweed sport coat, striped rep tie.

Found a quiet table in the dining room, ordered coffee. Thel was late, but not by much. And it was worth the wait.

She came down the winding staircase alone, lost in her own thoughts. Dressed western casual, jeans, boots, a fringed blouse. Hopelessly provincial by Hancock U standards. But corny or not, a lot more appealing than the drab, bag lady styles of the college, where dressing to please was as *déclassé* as shopping at Wal-Mart.

But she wasn't out of place here. In fact, I was the one dressed like a misfit. I was the only man wearing a necktie, sensible shoes instead of tooled boots. Thelma looked right for the room.

And people noticed. It was a long staircase and she's a very handsome woman. A bit haggard, perhaps, with wounded eyes. And grace. Not temporary, teenaged perfection. The kind of bone-deep beauty that can only be earned with time. And pain.

I recognized it the way I appreciate an elegant design. And it began to dawn on me just how badly I'd screwed up my life.

I rose when she joined me at the table, a courtesy I'd noticed other men offering, again, provincial by academic standards. And a wasted effort. She didn't notice.

We ordered drinks before dinner. Jack Black for her. A double. Gone before the appetizers arrived. She looked distracted, distant. Last chance.



"I don't know if you want to talk, but if we're going to, it has to be now."

No answer, but at least she was looking at me.

"You asked me to be honest, but there's something I haven't told you."

"Give me some credit, Cray, I already know more than I care to."

"Then treat it like a joke. Stop me if you've heard it already. I didn't leave Hancock because of you. I didn't get tenure, I got suspended. Fired."

"Over that girl? My God, what a waste. I hope she was worth it."

"She wasn't. Nothing has been worth it since we left Notre Dame."

"What are you saying? Back in college, being a teacher was all you talked about."

"Right. *Being* a teacher, which is not the same thing as teaching. I like being the center of attention, the perks, the money, lifetime security if you win tenure. I admire good teachers, know them when I see them. And I'm talented enough to know I'm not talented enough. I don't have the gift."

"Nonsense. You're the brightest guy I've ever known. The first college boy who ever talked me out of my jeans—and it's not like you were first one who tried. Kids love you. They tell me so."

"That's because I'm easy and entertaining. But I don't have the passion for it, Thel. Or the patience."

"Then what will you do?"

"Don't have the vaguest. How's that for honesty?"

"Pretty fair," she conceded. "Okay, my turn. I didn't adopt Ion to give him a better life. We were falling apart, and I wanted something for comfort after you left. So I badgered you into buying him for me, like a puppy."

"Thel, he would have died even if he'd never come here. He had a happier time with you than he ever could have had in that orphanage."

"It doesn't matter now. Thank you for telling me about losing tenure. It's nice that something wasn't my fault."

"None of it was your fault. Look, I know I've behaved badly, but—"

"Puh-leeze, Cray, my mom's been married four times. I've heard every sorry-ass excuse there is. We crashed and burned. It's normal, happens about half the time no matter who's to blame. How about we split the guilt, fifty-fifty?"

"I just want you to know I'm sorry. For all of it. I truly am."

"Yeah, I believe you really are. Funny, I always thought you were so bright. You told me about the different kinds of intelligence once . . . ?"

"Academic and functional. I can ace tests, Thel, I'm not so hot at aching life."

"And people thought we had nothing in common," she said, smiling for the first time in a long time. "Well, here's to us," she said, raising her glass, "the unlikeliest match since Porter and Dolly."

I had no idea who she was talking about, drank the toast anyway. And a few more. And the mood of the Last Supper lightened considerably. I'd feared confessing my sins might be the final nail, but it had the opposite effect. Thel seemed to revert to her raucous roots, showing more spirit than she had in a year. The liquor helped, but I thought the truth had worked a minor miracle.

Until I snapped awake just before dawn. Shaking. Drenched in sweat. A dream. A bad one. But an important one. I concentrated, trying to remember . . .

I was back in college. Not at Hancock U, at Notre Dame, sophomore or junior year. Sitting at the rear of a classroom. Psych 101. Listening to the professor expound on an odd aspect of suicide. Just before it happens, the victims become more cheerful. Because the decision's been taken. Their worries are over.

And I knew. Jesus!

Pulling on my jeans, I sprinted down the balcony to Thel's room. Hammered on the door.

"Open up!" No answer, no sound from within. Could I kick it in? Not barefoot. Looking around desperately for a weapon, I spotted the big Cougar rumbling through the Hacienda lot.

Charging down the steps, I tried to intercept her at the street. Too late! She was already in traffic. But not moving very fast.

I chased after her, running barefoot down the centerline, dodging traffic, losing ground with every step but too crazed to care. She couldn't get far. The big Merc was nearly out of gas and she knew it. She'd have to stop. I could see an Amoco station a few blocks ahead . . . Please, please, please slow down . . .

And she did! Swinging into the center lane to turn left, she paused to wait for oncoming traffic, just starting to turn when I caught up.

Yanked the door open. "Stop!" I roared. "Give me the gun!"

"What? What the hell—"

"I know what you're planning, Thel. Give me the damned gun!"

"Let go of the door, Cray!"

"No!"

"Let me go or I swear to God I'll blow your brains all over your dream car."

"You'll have to!"

"Why? You don't give a rip about me!"

"No? You're worth a half million dollars dead. Did you know that? As a surviving spouse, that's what I'd get. And I don't care. Please, give me the gun—"

Too late! I read it in her eyes. Grabbing her purse, she came up with the gun as I dove headfirst into the Cougar, grappling desperately for it. Managed to clamp my hands over hers, trying to wrestle it free—the blast rocked the Cougar like the end of the world.

**"T**ake a look at this machine, a Shelby Mustang GT 350. Pure poetry in streamlined steel. Looks like its doing a hundred and forty sitting still. In engineering we call it an exquisite design. Everything precisely where it has to be for maximum efficiency."

"I don't know," the young stockbroker mused. "It's very expensive."

"Nothing worthwhile in this life is ever cheap," I said, smiling at the minor truth. I wasn't worried about making the sale. He was hooked hard on the Mustang, just needed time to talk himself into it.

I have twenty-six cars in stock now, purchased with my Hancock severance pay. My father-in-law helped set me up with my own small car lot and restoration garage on the west side of Taos. He thought I was crazy. He was wrong.

The lot mints money. New Mex is yuppie country now, the haven of choice for Internet millionaires. I market classic muscle cars in impeccable condition, show them by appointment only, and demand double the going price. Young professionals gobble 'em up like hors d'oeuvres at an art fair.

Working twenty easy hours a week, I make five times my old salary at Hancock. When I get restless, I choose any car that suits me and take off to hit auto auctions and estate sales all over the country, hunting up orphan machines in need of rescue and rehab. Find them new lives in a new country. Haven't come across Red Bauer yet, but maybe I will.

There's only one part of my old life that I miss.

Thelma.

After dropping me at the emergency room, she took the Cougar and her share of the money and fled to Florida. Has a job managing a day care center in Fort Meyers. Caring for kids, doing well. Sober now, working her way out of the darkness. Sometimes, when business takes me that way, we go out to dinner. And we're such an obvious mismatch it's hard to believe we were ever married.

But we will be again. Someday. Eventually, she will come around. Partly because I'm not the same man anymore. Partly

because I am. I can still make her smile. And a spark of whatever drew us together back at Notre Dame is still smoldering.

Besides, she owes me. Big time.

When people comment on my limp, I tell them my ex-wife shot me. It always gets a chuckle. And sometimes in the office, away from their families, men ask me why she did it. Was she trying to slow you down? Or was she just a bad shot?

"No," I say. "She was trying to kill me. And she did." Which gets an even bigger laugh.

I smile too. But I'm not joking.

I'm not the surviving spouse. Thelma is.

The man I was died in that car when Thelma shot me.

And Red Bauer was absolutely right.

If you tell people the truth, they'll laugh every time. ♡

## Solution to the September "Dying Words"

### WORD LIST

- A. Carthage
- B. Addendum
- C. Tuna fish
- D. Huffishly
- E. Esthetes
- F. Rockets
- G. Inheritor
- H. Northeast

- I. Entreated
- J. Cotton to
- K. Remoter
- L. Interview
- M. Euphonium
- N. Redeemer
- O. Bethlehem
- P. Organdy
- Q. Outhouse

- R. Knitted
- S. Sympathy
- T. Otter shrew
- U. Nourished
- V. Cubbyhole
- W. Roped in
- X. Irritated
- Y. Mendel
- Z. Effervesce

### QUOTATION

Author—CATHERINE CRIER

Work—"BOOKS ON CRIME" (*The Wall Street Journal*, November 26–27, 2005)

"... Poe used the medium of murder ... to delve into the darkest corners of the human psyche ... Arthur Conan Doyle asked: 'Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?' Many ... consider 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' to be the first entry in this genre."

# SHATTERPROOF

**J**ohn Frolic pounds his desk, stands and swears, and his voice rips the night's stillness. In her office, separated from her partner's by a wafer-thin wall, Sheila closes her eyes, puts down her pencil, and readies for another argument.

"What is it this time, John?" She moves down the dark corridor and stands in the door frame, left hand on her hip, yellow legal pad in her right.

Frolic sits in shadows. A small lamp, not unlike the kind used by diamond cutters, shines on a stack of papers on his sprawling wood desk. Sheila knows he can't read a balance sheet without the harsh spot, even with his heavy bifocals. Across the small room, the Empire State Building, its top red and green for the holiday season, dominates the window above the credenza.

"Sheila, I am not tired," he begins. "It is nine thirty. I've been here since ten o'clock this morning. For lunch, I had a chicken salad sandwich. Took me ten minutes to find a piece of chicken. No dinner yet, neither. But I am not tired."

Sheila, redheaded, forty-six years old, looking maybe fifteen years younger, enters and sits on Frolic's leather sofa. He looks at her long legs. After twenty-two years, she is no longer embarrassed; with her, he is a harmless lech.

"I envy you, John," she says. "I'm ready to fall out right here."

"See? You agree with me. Here, we are wasting our time." John, after forty years near the fur district, likes to affect the patois of his Jewish neighbors to cozy up to an unpleasant subject.

"Oh, John, please not again. We are not wasting our time." She nods at the spreadsheet on his desk. "Kepler Glass is a profitable business. Maybe not as profitable as—"

"As ten years ago, five years ago, last year," he barks.

"Rough times," she says sadly. In 1980, they employed two hundred and twenty people. This year the entire staff Christmas and Hanukkah card list amounted to eighty-five. Rough indeed: their decorative glass operation, to quote accountant Rosenberg's

memorable 1981 assessment, "kaput"; tableware shut down for almost a dozen years now; lens systems for digital computers beyond their imagination, as was photochromic glass. Commercial glass orders, from his friends in construction in New Jersey and Connecticut, kept them alive. But for how long?

"We barely made it through the holidays, Sheila."

"I know," she says. "But—"

"There are no 'buts' this time," he interrupts. "I'm going to sell. If I can't sell I'm going to close. That's final."

Sell? Who would buy?

"And, for once, don't try to talk me out of it," he adds. Round fingers tucked into his vest pocket, he paces behind his desk, moving in and out of darkness. So quickly, Sheila thought, so quickly he moves from charming businessman to bitter ogre. How many times had she watched him do business with a smile over lunch with clients only to have to listen to his red-faced ranting in the back of a cab on the way uptown?

"You will be putting eighty-five people out of work." No, eighty-six, she amends. Kepler Glass has been the centerpiece of her adult life, the only place she's ever worked, starting as a secretary and, through hard, hard work, a sliver of savvy, and sixty-six hundred dollars of the money her father left, becoming Frolic's partner on his fifty-fifth birthday four years ago. Remember that, John? Happy birthday, said the repo man, you owe seven thousand on the used tank furnace. You can't repossess a furnace, John sneered. "Oh, no? Watch." After much pleading and cajoling, she agreed to his offer of a partnership; John begrudgingly threw in four hundred, and the plant was saved.

"That isn't my problem," he says and scratches the nape of his neck where his toupee meets his thinning hair. "I am not their keeper. I am the owner. The business fails, the business closes. Simple." He dusts his hands together.

"John, listen to me. If we reopen tableware—"

"Sheila, don't start in with that again."

"Look at the numbers."

He pounds the stack of papers; the bellow startles her and he seizes the silence. "Don't tell me to look at numbers. The numbers don't tell what's in here." He violently taps his chest with his fingers. A hollow thud sounds.

His heart. He always invokes his heart, she thinks. But, for the past few years, she had begun to doubt whether he still had one. When a shipment of soda ash out of Richmond, Virginia, was delayed because a bank wouldn't guarantee Kepler's credit, he fired dead on the spot the shipping foreman, Mike Mallory, an old



ex-con who had been a reliable staffer for eight years. Only last week John's secretary, a nineteen-year-old cherub fresh out of vocational school, quit in tears after one too many of his spewing tirades, as had two others before her. Employee morale among the largely immigrant warehouse staff was in ruins; a moratorium on salary increases saw to that. Yet John continued to pull up to the loading dock in his new, obscenely luxurious Cadillac as the plant workers poured in from the dreadful Eighth Avenue subway station.

"We are finished," he spits. "I'll call Goldstein after the first of the year."

"John, you cannot sell without my approval."

He laughs. "Don't give me that. I don't need your approval and you know it. You hold a minority position." He drops into his high-backed chair. "This company belongs to Agnes and me."

At Goldstein's urging, Frolic, to shield himself from liability, put forty-five percent of his holdings in his wife's name when he signed over forty-five percent to his new partner. But Frolic claimed he held his wife's proxy and that plus his ten percent gave him majority interest in the firm.

"My father's money kept Kepler Glass alive," she says.

He looks at the dusty portrait of Max Kepler on the wall above the sofa. "Fathers," he says. "Everything I have I owe to fathers. To yours, to Agnes's." He laughs; it is smug, satirical. "Baloney. This company would have died ten years ago if I ran it like old man Kepler, that feeble bastard."

Max Kepler, an inventor, was not a businessman, Sheila remembers. He wasn't much of an inventor, either; he played a small role in the development of aluminosilicate glass and contributed his thinking on glass ceramics to the aerospace industry but, other than that, almost nothing. However, he did build a successful company to support his efforts and won the respect of his peers and his employees, a rare feat. Frolic managed neither.

"And your money, Sheila, gets you more than you deserve."

"John," she says, containing her anger. "I made more as chief accountant than I do now."

"Nobody begged you for your money, sweetheart."

No? "Look, I'm tired and I'm hungry. You want to call Goldstein, go ahead and call him." He smiles; condescension spills across the desk. "But I will do everything I can to keep you from closing Kepler Glass."

"What can you do?" he laughs. "What, Miss Sheila? What are you going to do?"

We'll see, she thinks. We'll see.



Agnes Kepler Frolic looks in the mirror and sees a sad old sack of a woman, sixty-three going on ninety-three, withered from the top of her forehead to the heels of her pinching shoes. One hundred brush strokes through her silver hair in the morning, another hundred at night. With each she moans, "I hate you, John. I hate you, John."

This house is big, yes, and it is comfortable. But it is your house, John. My father's house, nestled away in the beautiful Ramapo Mountains, had a workbench and sawdust and scattered blueprints and silica flakes, the smell of soda-lime and a Bunsen burner. In your house, I see Naugahyde and cable TV, a wet bar, Gucci loafers, a VIP card from a casino in Atlantic City, ridiculous dice-shaped cufflinks.

Would it be too much to go for a walk in the woods, John? You took me to the forest, red, sienna, and crystal under the golden sky, when you first went to work for my father's company. Was it so horrible, John, that you could only marry me? That you couldn't love me? Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one. I hate you, John. You made me grow old. You took my pride and my youth. You stole my laughter.

She looks at her pale reflection in the dressing room mirror. Where are you tonight, John? Ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four. Not that I care, John, even if you are in a cheap hotel with another of your paid lovers. I'd just like to know, John, where are you? I would consider it an act of kindness, almost an act of love, if just once you told me where you are, where you will be.

Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven. The white Princess phone on the vanity rings. It is so quiet, so still in this huge, soulless house, the little bell echoes.

"Hello?"

"Agnes? This is Sheila Anders."

"Yes, Sheila, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm not sure, Agnes," she says in near despair, "I think I need your help."

A smile creases her wrinkled face. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. "Go on, dear."

**"N**obody's going to want to buy this place, John. You know that."

Goldstein is calm, studied. He sits on the leather sofa, not far from where Sheila sat last month when John told her Kepler Glass was dead.

"What about the equipment? There's got to be somebody out there who needs—"

"Come on, John, you think maybe Corning Glass is going to come into Manhattan begging to buy secondhand equipment?"

John looks at the ceiling. "Thirdhand."

"All right, thirdhand," Goldstein says. "So you're faced with two possibilities: You can close down and get out of the business or you can file under Chapter 11, cut your losses, and probably continue."

"No. No bankruptcy." He takes his feet from the desk and stares at the blotter. Wouldn't Agnes love that. He could hear her shrill voice, ringing from her bedroom across the hall to his. My father never had to declare bankruptcy, she'd yell. You're so smart and he was so dumb, but it's you who failed. Locking the door kept her out, but he'd yet to find how to silence her bone-chilling voice.

Goldstein fidgets on the sofa. "You're in a fix, buddy. Maybe you ought to follow Sheila's advice and start up the tableware operation again."

"That's great, Artie. Real solid business thinking." He taps the side of his head with his gold Cross pen. "You ever hear of throwing good money after bad? That's what I'd be doing if I open tableware again."

"Why don't you let Sheila buy you out? I can arrange suitable financial arrangements—"

"Hey, you representing her or me? I don't want to hear her name one more time. Sheila, Sheila. Sheila this, Sheila that. You love her so much, Artie, why don't you marry her?"

"She wouldn't have me and you know it."

John sips his drink; ice rattles around his thick glass. "You know what I ought to do?"

"What?"

Another sip. "Nothing. Forget it," he replies. But in his mind he thinks, I ought to burn this place down.

Artie picks up his glass from John's desk. "Anyway, you let me know what you want to do. Mazel tov, kid."

"Yeah, yeah, Happy New Year to you, too," he says and taps Artie's glass with his. I am standing in front of you, Goldstein, but I am one thousand miles away.

"Sheila, I hope you don't think it odd of me to bring you all the way up here."

Sheila leans over to kiss Agnes on the cheek. "No, not at all," she says politely. It's fifteen degrees and Agnes selects the Watchung Reservation up in the Ramapo Mountains, forty miles outside of

Manhattan, as their five P.M. meeting place. Of course it's odd, Agnes; most of what you do is odd. She runs her tongue over her soft lips to remove the cheap rouge.

Fresh snow covers the quiet cedar trees, and pine cones dot the white wilderness. Agnes turns up the heat in her car. Sheila blows on her cold hands. A chill that starts in her ankles vibrates to her shoulders as warm dry air brushes her legs.

"So he's going to sell," Agnes says flatly, impassively. Sheila nods. "I didn't think he could without my approval."

"He says he holds your power of attorney."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means he doesn't need you to approve the sale. He'll use your forty-five percent along with his ten and have the majority interest. It's in the terms he drew up when I gave him my money. I should have—"

Agnes turns from her and looks ahead at the sun's last glowing arch beyond the white crest.

"He's already talked to Goldstein," Sheila adds.

"Can't you talk him out of it?"

"I've tried."

Agnes, exasperated, says, "I wonder what my father would do?"

Nothing, Sheila thinks. He'd be as baffled as we are. Any time you took him from his workshop, his toys, he was baffled. Unless he was ready to demonstrate his latest invention. Then Max Kepler became an eleven-year-old boy, the bubbling joy on his face identical to what it was on a Christmas morning back in Mecklenburg. So many times he'd bounce into John's office with an armload of blueprints or a crazy-quilt stack of calculations. "John, wait until you see what I have here," he'd say.

"Mr. Kepler," John would reply, patronizing him, mocking him, "glassmaking hasn't changed in six thousand years, but you're going to tell me it will change today."

"Remember when your father tried to come up with that cleansing solution that wouldn't damage glass?"

Agnes laughs gently, quietly. Kepler knew industry preferred a hydrofluoric acid solution to clean brass and copper fixtures but was reluctant to use it on building ornaments near windows because it could weaken glass. Unaware that an extremely mild solution for such work already existed, Max set out to make one; it took him four months to exactly duplicate what was already sold in supply stores:

"He should have checked with the Patent Office," Agnes says with another laugh. It was easy to make fun of that flop; using her father's formula, Kepler Glass never again spent a dime on hydro-

fluoric acid-based commercial cleaning solvents.

Both women, without a word, think of another of Max's offbeat ideas, but this time neither one laughs. Kepler proposed shatterproof glass as safety plate glass for shop windows. He knew that people who had accidents with glass were more likely to be injured by piercing jagged shards than the impact. A thirteen-year-old girl had lost her right eye in such a bloody incident at a jewelry shop not far from the Kepler plant. But shatterproof windows—a thin sheet of adhesive plastic sandwiched between two thin layers of glass—when damaged broke into tiny pieces so small they were virtually unable to cause serious injury.

John, by now Max's son-in-law and a full partner in Kepler Glass, cared little for safety but at first thought Max, finally, might have something. Not every shopkeeper could afford costly alarm systems, he reasoned. Kepler could offer shatterproof glass as a security device—the simple logic that two windows are harder to break than one would dazzle these greenhorns. And what did they know from shatterproof glass? He could tell them it cost fifty dollars more a standard frame than regular window glass and they'd believe him.

One hot July afternoon Max set up a five foot high sheet of his shatterproof glass, taut in a narrow steel frame, and, to mimic a jewelry store display, put his own erratic wristwatch behind it. John, Sheila, and twenty other staff members, many of whom had witnessed earlier failures, reluctantly gathered. Max, on short bowed legs, sweat-stain rings around the underarms of his royal blue shirt, practically trotted around the room to make sure everyone could see.

He then raised his calloused hand and, with an audible grunt, punched the glass sheet. To everyone's surprise, nothing happened; the glass didn't crack. He picked up a hardback book and flung it against the window. A slight wobble, yes, but no break. Max was delighted, as was the relieved staff. Led by Sheila, they broke into good-natured applause.

Placid, unimpressed, John stepped around the group and placed two black suction cups joined by a single steel handle against the sheet. From his suit jacket side pocket, he removed a dual-edged glass cutter and, with four short, precise lines, sliced through both layers of glass and the plastic adhesive. It took him two minutes to undo Max's dream.

Max took the tool and examined it. It had never occurred to him that such a device, with a long, beveled blade to work against the inner sheet as the diamond-hard blade slit the outside, could exist. Bewildered, he dropped the weapon.

"They sell 'em in hardware stores," John taunted as the staff drifted away in embarrassment. "Well, it's back to the drawing board, ain't it?" The sting of his son-in-law's remarks cut Max as deftly as the blade would have. He had badly misjudged him, this once-sweet boy he had nurtured. Surely he now knew John had played him perfectly and had stolen both his prizes, his daughter and his company.

"But it is safe maybe," Max said to no one. To finish the humiliation, John flicked the sheet with the back of his hand above the box he'd cut and the glass broke into five hundred tiny pieces. "Not much for safety, neither," John cracked, as several small slivers hung from his bleeding knuckles.

"Your father was a fine man, Agnes."

"Why did he let John do it?" she replies. "Why did he let him take over the company?"

Their breath had steamed the windshield, and the falling evening made it hard to find the twinkling stars. "I think he did it for you, Agnes. I think he did it because he loved you." The comment was improbable; everyone knew John and Artie had tricked Max into signing over Kepler Glass. But Sheila said it gently and could see her subtle prompting was working.

Mike Mallory stands in the shadows near the Kepler loading dock and throws lit matchsticks into the street. Less than a mile from Times Square, West 28th Street, lined with teeming gray warehouses, is a ghost town. Funny, Mike thinks, for eight years I couldn't walk down this street without bumping into some chump. Now I am all alone in this cold, starless night. Wild, ain't it?

He looks at his cheap watch, then holds it against his ear. She said ten o'clock. It was ten fifteen and still no sign of her. Where the hell is she?

Puffs of steam come from his nose and mouth as he leans against the brick wall and waits. A Checker blows down the block, bumping hard on a manhole cover, sending the passenger in back against the roof. The cabbie laughs; Mike thinks maybe he hits that spot for the hell of it. Every night he zips down the block and sends a passenger sprawling across the back of his hack.

Soon the cab is a faded memory and the last of the matches goes flying onto the frozen concrete. Mike digs his hands deep into the pockets of his short brown corduroy coat. Imagine getting canned after eight years; then a year later getting a call like that. Why would he want to see me after all this time? Maybe he wants to apologize. In the joint, you'd hassle a guy and a few weeks later,



when he finally found out how much damage you could do to him, he'd send his chicken over to make peace. That's when you knew you had him. That's when you turned up the gas and really burned him. In a crazy way, he admired Frolic for cutting him so hard and so cold. Now he wants to apologize. Too bad.

The rusty traffic light at the corner changes to green with a click but no cars, not even screaming taxis, come toward him. I wonder who his new secretary is? Nice, smooth voice. Real nice. Probably looks real nice, too.

For no reason, Mike begins to whistle, of all dumb things, "Melancholy Baby."

I don't think I've been on these stairs since old man Kepler died, Sheila thinks, and I know I've never been on them at ten thirty at night. Though a naked bulb lights each landing, the steps are black, and the wind from below blows through with a moaning whistle. Moving slowly, she stumbles but recovers before her knee hits the ground.

Noise isn't a problem—the reinforced concrete forms a virtual tomb—silence is. Sheila scrapes her flats against the sandy stairs and taps her rings against the steel handrail, deliberately making enough sound to frighten curious rats, like the one she saw gnawing on an empty Styrofoam coffee cup in the alley. Thus far the only rat she'd run into, on the fifth floor, was long dead.

Short of breath, hot and damp under winter clothes, she finally reaches the eighth floor. Scores of cigarette butts, from production and shipping employees sneaking out for unscheduled breaks from the danger and stench of flammable liquids and noxious acids, litter the landing. Kicking through the debris, she finds the dented knob and carefully pulls back the heavy steel-reinforced door. Its grunting squeal rattles down and around the empty stairwell.

Inside, the warehouse is in shadows; it, too, is lit only by naked bulbs, but its concrete floor is clear and reflects the dim light. Pallets packed with crushed boxes fill the center of the room. Packing crates are stacked against the walls. The street lamps outside send a dull glow up through the windows. In the distance, she sees the Empire State Building, back to its usual white light, a vigilant beacon in the harsh, moonless winter night.

Bending so low she's hidden by the pallet loads, Sheila creeps softly toward the front stairwell that leads from the eighth floor to the narrow corridor between the partners' offices. Shadows cut across the wall and floors, making the dark darker, giving strange shapes to normally routine objects. Her blouse clings to her long,

moist spine. She stops to steady herself; sweat slips from her red bangs and kisses her dry lips. She takes in a deep breath, lets it out and sees the stream flow from within her. Composed, as composed as a murderess can be, she heads for the back door.

As she moves within ten feet of it, it swings open with a startling burst and bangs loudly against the wall. Quickly, she darts behind a packing crate, under a reaching shadow. Oh God, he saw me, she thinks. Or did he? Just in case, she dips her right hand in her jacket pocket.

"Where the hell am I?" John says aloud to no one. The door swings behind him and slams shut, though with less fury than it had when it chipped the wall seconds earlier.

This better work, he thinks. In his left hand there's a Colt .45 malt liquor bottle filled halfway with hi-test gasoline he'd siphoned from his Caddy. In his right he holds the Bic lighter he tested twenty times in his office before he headed down the stairs.

He turns to his right, toward the mild fumes, to the caged room where flammable liquids are stored each evening in special containers. Squinting—his glasses lay on the *Hustler* magazine he left on his desk—he sees a calendar with an illustration of Jesus and the Sacred Heart crudely taped against the wall. Superstitious idiots, he thinks. I should worry about them? I'll be glad to get rid of them. He laughs to himself; one of them will probably be blamed for this.

Oh, the genius of this. Not once did I do anything out of my usual routine, except to establish one hell of an alibi. He reviews his evening: Put the Caddy in a garage on 63rd Street near the Odeon Cineplex, buy a ticket at the theater, and sneak away. With his fingers wrapped around the lighter, he runs his hand along his pants pocket and feels the ticket stub near his keys.

Switching the bottle to his other hand, he dips into his overcoat pocket and pulls out a rag. He dabs gasoline on it, twirls it around his finger, and jabs it into the bottleneck, stuffing it until it almost touches the liquid. Positioning the Bic, he reviews the procedure: Flick the lighter, touch it to the rag, throw the bottle near the cage, watch the flaming gas stream flow toward the chemicals, run the hell out the back door, and head toward Times Square. From there, take the subway to 63rd and get back to the garage by the time the movie lets out.

He wipes his forehead with the coat sleeve. The lighter clicks and an orange and blue flame seems to shoot from his thumb. Carefully, he brings the flame to the rag. It catches instantly. Turning slightly, he faces the cage and cocks the bottle behind his ear.

"John," Sheila says. Her soft voice hits him with the force of a clarion's blare. He turns but before he can reply she slashes at him with an awkward-motion, her long arm swiftly moving from right to left across his throat. He feels a cold breeze past his neck, then, oddly, without reason, feels a moist warmth spreading across his chest.

He tries to speak but his voice is gone; a grotesque gurgle comes out instead. Dropping the lighter, he grabs at his carotid artery and jugular vein with his empty hand and feels the wound, deep, open, separating, pouring blood like water from a broken valve. Weak-kneed, dizzy, he falls backward, banging his head hard against the slippery, bloodstained floor. The gas-filled bottle drops near him. Sheila, seeing the flash, turns and bolts toward the back door.

Seconds later, a small crack in the night is followed by an enormous explosion as the short blast from the Molotov ignites the caged room. In an instant, John's body is devoured by burning flames. So is the eighth floor warehouse.

**M**ike Mallory jumps at the sound of the shattering explosion. His heart pounding in triple time, he looks up, then quickly bends to cover his head as glass and brick, mortar and frame shower him.

Instinctively, he turns toward the building but realizes the futility. There's nobody in a warehouse at ten thirty; besides, if there was, there's nothing I could do about it now. Bright orange flames, strewn with black fingers as chemicals burn, burst from the gaping hole in the building. Mike silently counts the stories. Eight; too bad it wasn't Frolic's office on nine. Maybe the old bastard might've been in there with one of his cross-eyed hookers and gotten his butt roasted.

Mike's eyes begin to burn. In the distance, fire engines wail and push closer. A golden, billowing fire may be beautiful to watch, he thinks, but I'd better get the hell out of here. He begins an awkward trot, a formless jog, away from the furnace. A blue and white police car careens the wrong way up the block, red lights flashing, siren blasting, and cuts him off. A young cop, leather jacket wide open, tie flapping, jumps from the passenger side and pulls his .357 service revolver. "Right there," he shouts. "On the ground. Now."

"You're kidding," Mike says. The cop looks like he's twelve years old.

"Mister, I believe I can part your hair from here with this baby," he says, his voice steady. "I suggest you hit the ground real soon or I'll get my chance."



Monsignor Merrill, the last of the evening's mourners, gently lets himself out the front door. Agnes Kepler Frolic, widow, says a quiet goodnight, clumsily kicks her shoes into the hall closet, and enters the oversized living room. Sheila Anders sits on the rose loveseat, her hands demurely folded in the lap of her black dress. What a nice girl, thinks Agnes, taking the trouble to start a fire.

Wood crackles and sends a warm glow across to the peach club chair where Agnes sits. "Well," she says softly.

"Well," Sheila replies. "It was a lovely ceremony, Agnes." Though, she thinks, it's funny how people will stay away from the funeral mass of a man who tried to incinerate his own company.

"What happened to Malloy?"

"Mallory," Sheila corrects. "He's been released. Lack of evidence."

"As you said he would. That was a good idea, Sheila."

Gave me a chance to slip away, she thought. If only I hadn't tripped on that rat carcass, I would've been gone before the fire engines arrived. She involuntarily rubs her twisted left ankle. "The police said he claimed a young woman with a sexy voice told him to meet John."

Agnes smiles. "I don't think I've ever been told I have a sexy voice before."

She stands and walks to the liquor cabinet. "Sherry?" And, when Sheila declines, "I hope you don't mind if I—"

"Of course not," Sheila says with a wave.

"You know what I was thinking," Agnes says and sips. "I was thinking how ironic it would be if it was my father's cleaning solution that caught fire and exploded."

Yes, Sheila thinks. Christ, she's actually pleased that John is dead. For Sheila it was something unpleasant that had to be done, but for Agnes it was an act of joy. Sheila looks at her quaintly tasting her sherry, and sees satisfaction.

"Did you use it?" Agnes asks.

For a moment, Sheila is confused. "The solution," Agnes adds.

"Oh yes," she replies. "It's very good for removing blood." Sheila had soaked the murder weapon in it as soon as she returned home. As the solution bubbled in her sink, Sheila paced her worn hardwood floors and, ears ringing, repeated maybe a hundred times, thank God for reinforced concrete.

"The company belongs to a Kepler again."

"That's true, Agnes. You now hold a majority interest in Kepler Glass."

"Fifty-five percent," she says.

They sit still as the older woman finishes her drink. A spitting

chip from a burning log in the stately fireplace occasionally cuts the silence. Odd that she should claim the company as hers, Sheila thinks as her face warms in the fluttering glow.

"I have a lot of plans, Sheila."

You do? "Oh?"

"Yes," she says. "As soon as Arthur prepares the proper papers, I'll assume my father's role as president."

Arthur? "Don't you think that's the way Father would have wanted it?"

Sheila smiles and runs her hands along the line of her dark skirt.

"Don't you think it best that I run the company for a while, Agnes? It may arouse suspicion if you jump in and appear eager to make changes."

"Arouse suspicion? I don't understand. The police know where I was. I was here, in bed, almost asleep, without means to get to or from New York."

"Your car—"

"In a garage. I believe it needed an engine tune-up. Besides, I called Arthur's answering service at nine fifty. He called me here ten minutes later."

The heat from the fire begins to sting Sheila's cheek. Agnes stands to pour herself another drink. "Did you bring it?" she asks.

It: the dual-edged glass cutter John had used to shatter Max's shatterproof dream. First Max, then Agnes, had kept it all these years. How easily it thoroughly slashed across and through John's throat, effortlessly tearing skin and cartilage. There had been fear an autopsy would have revealed the unique cut but now . . .

"I thought I told you I wanted it back," Agnes says. "Did you bring it?"

"No," Sheila says with a shy, thoughtful smile. "I think I'd better hang on to it for a while." She stands and, with long careful steps, walks away from the heat and thinks, you never know. I might need it again. ♫



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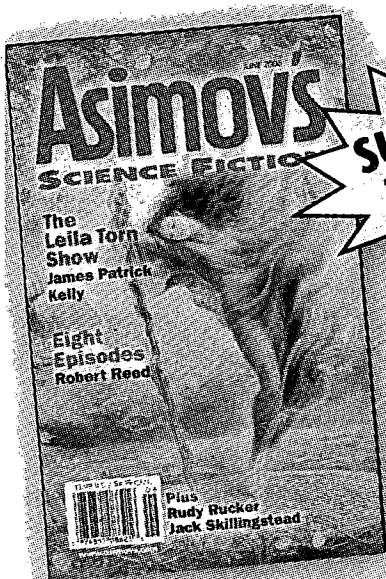
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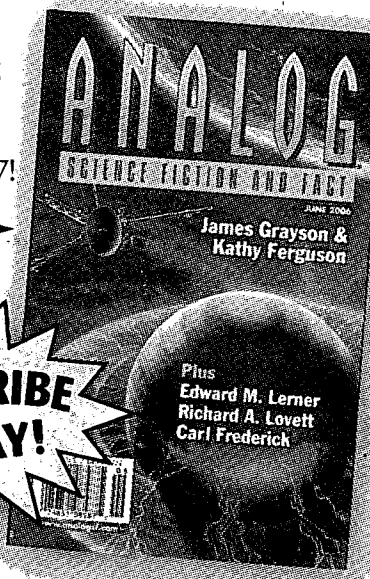
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# THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by John J. Owens of Greenville, South Carolina. Honorable mentions go to Jean Majury of Mercer Island, Washington; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Chris Laing of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Ruth M. McCarty of Leominster, Massachusetts; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Gil Stern of Las Vegas, Nevada; Linda Tyler of Aberdeenshire, Scotland; Bianca Beeks of Alexandria, Virginia; Lucien Spelman of Wellesley, Massachusetts; and Lawrence J. Pacl of Hermitage, Tennessee.



*Louie Psihoyos/Science Fiction/Getty Images*

## BONES OF CONTENTION

JOHN J. OWENS

**D**etective Smalley, you old dinosaur," said Officer Caitlin Summers, "no one uses real film anymore, everything's digital." She called him "detective" out of respect; Smalley was actually retired over fifteen years, picking up spare money as a museum guard. Her partner, all blond hair and bulging muscles, smiled indulgently as the old man shuffled around the crime scene—several vandalized dinosaur skeletons now covered in a plastic tarp.

"Museum needs a record," Smalley said.

"They'll get one," said young Mr. Weight Room. "The crime scene guys will be here soon. We'll get a full analysis: prints, dust patterns, invisible footprints, DNA evidence, computerized fiber analysis. And a complete digital record."

Smalley nodded. "You could do all that. Or you could just arrest Martha Kincaid. You know, the gift shop clerk you just let walk out of here?"

"Huh?" said Officer Summers, who was younger than Smalley's granddaughter. "She was nervous, but that's not illegal."

Smalley sighed. "She had green dust on her fingertips. We use an antioxidant mist in the rare coin room. It turns the dust green. This—" he waved a free hand, "was all a diversion. She probably stole the Incans. They're rare but not unique. Easy to sell." He went back to snapping pictures. "She took the elevator. You can probably catch her if you take the stairs."

The two youngsters stared at each other, then took off in a sprint.

Retired Detective Smalley glanced up at the dinosaur skeleton. "I'm not extinct yet," he told it.

# ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

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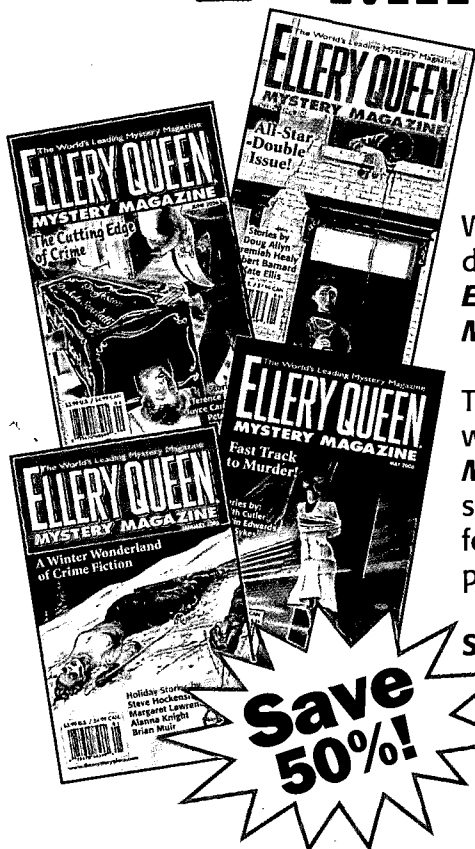
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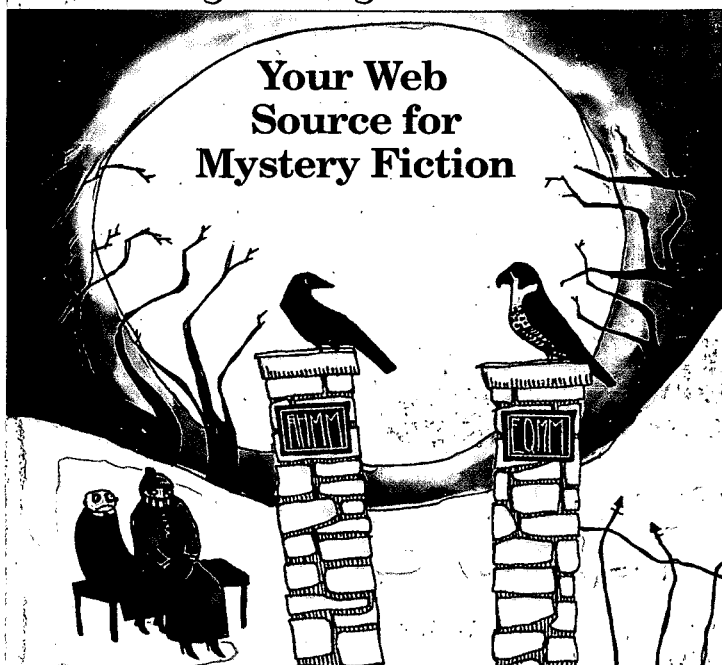
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